And Live with the Animals

Poems

By

Ann Struthers

The Struthers Family
Cedar Rapids, IA

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Introduction

Eleanor Ann Struthers, Ph.D. (1930-2024), an author, teacher, wife, and mother of four, was an energetic and enthusiastic lover of life. Born and educated in Iowa, she lived most of her life there, completing degrees at Morningside College and the University of Iowa. During the second half of her teaching career, she offered courses in American and Middle Eastern Literature and in creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA. Though based in Iowa, with her husband, Melvin, she travelled widely in the North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, twice teaching abroad as a Fulbright Professor in Syria and Sri Lanka.

Among the unpublished manuscripts she left at her death on 24 February 2024 were several collections of poems that she had not yet published. The most recent of those was the first part of this book, *I Think I Will go and Live with the Animals*. The dates of her computer files indicate that she last worked on this collection on 7 July 2021. I believe that it was about this time that she turned her attention to what seemed to her a more urgent task, a memoir of her years as a Fulbright Professor of American Literature at the University of Aleppo, Syria. Her feeling of urgency was stimulated by the destruction of Aleppo and in Syria as a whole in the Syrian Civil War and by a notable decline in her health as she passed the age of 90.

As her close friend for many years, I agreed with her children to attempt completing several of her collections for some form of publication that would make her work more accessible.

My editorial work has consisted of gathering from among her uncollected typescripts the poems dealing with animal subjects to add to *I Think I will Go*, and then, examining all the poems, correcting a few typographical errors that I was reasonably sure were errors rather than deliberate choices. I have not attempted a critical study of the poetry in the Struthers papers. Instead, I have aspired to completeness — to include here all the poems I found that present animals in some way. As a result, there are several works that seem closely related to each other, perhaps different revisions of the same poem or distinct poems on the same subject. I place these together for easy comparison. I leave it to other readers to sort out how these pieces may relate to each other.

A number of her poems in *I Think I Will Go* appear in other collections, notably *What You Try to Tame* (2004) and *The Kindness of Crocodiles* (2018). All of these probably should be considered her final revisions. This is not the case with the poems in parts 2 and 3, some of which also appear in *My Aleppo* (2026).

The uncollected poems in Part 2 are in a sort of chronological order, based upon the date when she last saved the file containing the poem. I have included the "last saved" date after each poem. It should be clear that "last saved" is not the same as "final revision."

The poems in Part 3 have been transcribed from typescripts in the Ann Struthers Papers in the George Henry Archives at Coe College. These rarely have dates and, so, are presented here alphabetically by title. As with the poems in Part 2, there is no simple way to know whether any version is a final revision. Struthers may or may not have considered any of these finally finished. I leave it to others to make such judgments.

The final selection is a short story addressed to the children in her family.

In "Memories of Aleppo" from the collection *My Aleppo*, Struthers writes about her childhood on a northwest Iowa farm, where she became familiar with the domestic and

wild animals most common there: horses, cattle, pigs, barn fowl, dogs, cats, wild birds, rabbits, squirrels and others. From the beginning she did "live with the animals," if not in all the senses she means in these poems, and she early was drawn to understand them and to observe them closely. Close attention to the lives of animals characterizes these poems, and often one finds joy, humor, irony, and more somber motifs — predation, irritation, mutual animosities, the frictions of living alongside those with inconvenient habits and necessities, the needless cruelties of human exploitation, and the losses of Anthropocene extinctions. Often she calls upon us to be kinder to our fellow travelers and to each other.

Terry Heller
Coe College
2026

Animals

How did you get into my poems?
I shooed you away, brushed you off
as if you were pesky flies.
Although I resisted, reneged, revolted,
your pale flutterings, small chirps,
great tail waggings, sly meows
overcame me, and finally I couldn't ignore you,
all of you Platonists, and me, an Aristotelian!

O creatures without words,
some of you burrow beneath the meanings to show me
that knowing is of minimal importance,
and while I tramp along in my lead boots,
others of you fly the highways of airy nothing.

You insinuate yourselves into my friendship,
and I must love you for what you naturally are
even though wolf salivates for the lamb,
ion does not give up his claws, his pounce,
and rabbit keeps trembling among the clover.

From *Coe Quarto: A Broadsheet of Faculty Writing*,
Coe College, Fall 1999.

Part 1

I Think I Will Go and Live with the Animals

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 32.

I Think I Will Go and Live with the Animals

There is comfort in animals.
They give themselves so completely,
so openly to their lives,
to today without any yesterdays or tomorrows.
They keep inherited patterns
without remorse or exultation,
move easily in their agility and grace,
accept their own faces, their bodies.
Even the baggy elephant doesn't mourn
before the mirror,
beautiful tiger doesn't gloat before his.

They are so suspicious of our species,
so right about us.

Aubade at Lake Okoboji, Teddy Shuttleworth's Cabin

I haven't much news today it being early yet.
Sarah Orne Jewett

Oaks along the shore, still dark,
secret rustle of cat bird hiding in the vine,
wild turkey, timid deer, wildcat stealthy,
fading back into shadows as the sun
exposes the skin of the world,
coyote, trots across the clearing at the last minute.
Beneath the little waves, sunfish, perch, pike,
black cloud of tadpoles swirling,
hunting a shadow, a refuge in the bull rushes,
hideaway among the cattails.
Above it all, formation of gossiping pelicans,
all the bawdy bird news,
blue heron hunched on the dead branch,
ready to unsnap his accordion neck,
stiletto beak for the silly fish, complacent frog.

There will be news:
riots, accidents, earthquakes,
fires, betrayals, insurrections,
too early, yet, for murder.

The Fires around Us

The pangolin, Marianne Moore's armored
artichoke,
With his prehensile tongue, a pink ribbon
long as his body and more flexible, searches out
termites two by two and one by one.
National Geographic's ultra-violet night lights
trace his transmigration, as he moves, all of a
piece,
as if on caterpillar tractor treads,
rolling forward on his knuckles.
The screen flares
with a lightning fire during the dry season,
I hear terrible crackling, screams of birds —
watch wild dogs run beside the ibex,
all one terror-stricken herd.
Grasshopper's juices roast, pop and snap.
The spoonbill, not fastidious in her opera feathers
of peach and green, wading where little frogs
hide in stinking mud, screeches, takes flight.
The swamp and its nearby forest burn into the
night.
I know the pangolin, too slow to outrun
the insatiable flames is dead, but no,
the camera searches the charred, still smoking
landscape, and finds him poking
his pointed-cylinder snout from out
someone's old burrow. I hope it was
the first pangolin I saw by night, not some
stand-in actor, but after such destruction
the audience needs hope. I need hope
for the greater conflagrations of this world:
Sinhalese killing Tamils, Tamils killing Sinhalese;
Jews killing Palestinians, Palestinians killing Jews;
Iraqis killing Iranians and Americans,
Americans killing Iraqis,
Men beating their wives or killing them;
children abused. Or children hungry, whose
parents
want to feed them but cannot. O God, one
pangolin
saved from the fires of hell, and so many lost,
so many sweet lives cut off. Who will become
their intercessor, to speak
for the unknown millions of common people
who want a little peace, a place to grow
a garden, raise a few chickens,
a little charcoal for cooking, a blanket at dark?
In this great, rich world, just a little place,
small haven, a burrow safe from the fire?

Getting Along Just Fine without You
DMZ and the Animals
a double abecedarian

Asiatic black bear's wiry fuzz,
briar caught, the sign of many
cautious prowls, through mine fields' complex;
deer (musk) step careful. Even a faint shadow
enervates them, rock falls like bark of Kalashnikov,
faint ghost of 65 years past. Today's tabu
gets stretched, tested — border soldiers taught
high tension. But the antelope-like Amur gorals
insist on leaping, climbing (really goats). Siberian Tiger
just might have been seen although both army's GHQ
keeps this news buried beside rumors of the Yeti. Snow deep
lying printed all winter by three toes of quail and pheasants who go
moseying around mine fields. Low-lying fields used to be known
nationally for their rice paddies, the mountains for old dim,
original forests, lumber, tranquility not in pill
pleasure, but pine's perfume. Time's trick
quits all of these, so the animals now are raj,
reveling in a zone too dangerous for men. Where basmati
settled its roots and grew in the paddies, water snakes, frogs, birds high
tweeting calling, singing
up the clouds, treble clef, bass clef,
vocalizing happy. Without roads, cars, humans and their garbage,
white-napped cranes, red-crowned, endangered, here safe, saved,
expecting to flourish. Battlefields become aquatic, bucolic.
Years without mankind, cranes' message of peace above the hub-hub:
zeal of nature turns killing fields into paradise, Animal Shangri-La.

The Great Apes Visit Yala
Sri Lanka

At dinner in the hotel's open pavilion,
two buffet lines, one Western, one Oriental,
and a grizzled squirrel in the rafters.
We hear the piper in his tree-stand,
reeds and the loneliness of islands, ripples of lagoons,
velvet approach of leopard paws.
Moon's raw rind rises over the mountains,
darkness warm and moist, and late at night in our room
we hear the wild boars grunting past, looking for the garbage bins.
Drifting toward sleep, the piper still playing,
flute, piccolo, native pipes; he is of Hamlin,
and we would follow him through the jungle
except there the huge constrictors and cobras slither,
wind themselves about tree trunks, dangle from dark branches,
the Toque Monkey lifts his hat, exposing his brain
that appears to be as good as ours, its electric synapses
perhaps faster, and far off in the swamps
the water buffalo, impervious in their leather coats,
snort and lower their ivory horns
and none of the animals sleep except us,
the most important of the great apes.

The Kindness of Crocodiles

Mugger Crocodile

When the ancient kings built holding tanks,
irrigation runs, they didn't know
these were perfect for lazy mugger.
(Not in croc's nature to give thanks.)
In reedy water croc's quick jaws trap
whatever happens to come too close:
Northern Shoveler, little Marbled Teal.
Lazy beast grins. Then, fast **SNAP!**
The Fulvous Whistling Duck can whistle
no more in the croc's hungry belly.
Masked Booby, Oriental Darter,
Wooly-necked Stork, Jungle Fowl's thistle
feathers, Glossy Ibis, down the hatch.

Salty Crocodile

Salty Croc appears deciduous
stretched out sunning beside the tidal
river, opens his great jaws to catch
a breeze to cool his amoral brain,
snacks on Anhinga, Small Ringed Plover.
Both display their rows of vicious teeth
that don't chew. They gulp whole, no sauce, plain,
except the largest prey, Sāmbhar deer.
He's gnawed in half, left-over meat
stuffed in larders dug in muddy banks.
Mold and rancid not a problem here.
(Croc cries without a handkerchief.)

Croc lies like a log half sunk, his eyes locked
atop miss nothing, the river's his platter
serene, until some innocent comes by, shocked
when croc lunges, makes a hole in the water.

Immunity

He proffers a saucer of milk
and marigold petals
at the snake god's shrine, every precaution.

The swirls about his arm are blue that's
not blue,
from ink mixed with cobra venom,
the tattoo artist promising
sure protection while planting rice shoots
in ankle-deep water where the rat
the rat snake and their predator,
the cobra, swim.
We all know that sometimes the Karma

runs

out,
or we don't know how evil we were
in a former life
or won't admit how ragged our souls are in this
one,
or how arrogant
or careless we are
near the rat, the rat snake
and the cobra.

Kissing the Cobra

A barren woman takes one in her brown hand,
caresses its belly; as its hood flares, kisses
the yellow spot on its head where the Buddha
left his blessing.

Maligawa in Victoria Park

Inside a stockade built to hold him upright,
painted purple with iodine where he skinned
his hide when he toppled over
(they brought in a crane to lift him),
now the keepers tempt him
with bunches of bananas, with chocolates
that had given him diabetes, made him shaky,
weak enough to die.

His admirers come to pay homage
to him, the Maligawa, straightest back,.
most perfect tusks, finest elephant in Sri Lanka,
carrier of the reliquary that holds the sacred tooth
of the Buddha in the Perahera Parade.
Slowly he turns his great, heavy head,
looks at me with his small, sad eye
under his lush lashes, as if to say,
'when I wanted to die, they resuscitated me.'

And I thought of my mother,
thin unto death in her hospital bed
who could not eat nor talk.
Same silent plea. Same suffering eye.

Mourning the Pocketed Elephants
Sestina for Sri Lanka

In Deloraine's dining room the lucky
bird has built her nest above the candelabra's light
We eat hoppers, soft-spine rambutan. Sparrow flies
in and out through interstices between the wall
and ceiling. But elephants fear roads, noise, can't escape
though they remember traditional trails, can't fly
over civilization's highways, can't spread Dumbo wings, sail

like outrigger fishing boats, sea wind tasting their square sails.
Chameleons chirp across Sri Lankan ceilings, lucky
insect eaters, their tongues electric speed. No gnat escapes.
At Adam's Peak tourists climb the dark for dawn's first light
(Adam's footprint there), Ascend between the tiger-paw carved wall
at Sigiriya, leave love poems to rock drawings of the lotus ladies. Fly-

way tourist birds, Europe's storks and plovers fly
here for a winter vacation. They sail
the updrafts over any palm they please, the military walls
built for the fort at Galle. Dutch captains, lucky
they thought, with its great stone battlements — highlight
of their engineering acumen, but tsunami escaped,

slid around behind it. For city, crew and captain, there was no escape.
At Colombo's harbor, the Dutch Burger's Union Club flies
the old Dutch flag. Beside the massive pool table, green lights
display the yellowed rules for Rangoon Snooker.
Sailors from the China Sea, Indian Ocean chalked cues here, lucky
ones won their bets. The floors and ceilings teak, so are the walls.

You can hear the steps of Conrad coming up the stairs. The walls,
if they could talk, would tell the traders' tales: escapes,
deals gone bad, the drunks, the drowned, the losers and the lucky.
The bar stocks old Dutch Boomsma Gin. Ceiling fans still slowly fly
their rigid wings that never will lift off. Here sale
of Jaffna pearls, Ratnapura rubies, elephant ivory. The light
laughter of girls on Saturday night, dance music, light
silk dresses. At dusk the flying foxes drift above the wallows
of the water buffalo. From Victoria park, they sail
their toothy prows into the night. The mangos' necks will not escape.
Babies cling to mothers' backs as thousands unwrap themselves, fly

low across the Otter's Swim Club. Arthur C. Clarke calls us lucky
to glimpse their sweet, light faces. But there's no escape
for elephants who can't fly their fears, their Reservations' walls
or sail from Galle's old harbor. Bad luck, bad luck, bad luck.

Parallelism

Onescritus, Alexander the Great's admiral
Elephants of Ceylon are the best war
elephants.

The King Missanka Malla
decreed five casts for people,
ten for elephants,
established a Department of Elephant Affairs
capital punishment for killing an elephant,
trained his war elephants with chains
on their trunks, whirled about
so no enemy could approach.
Criminals stomped to death, limbs torn off
tossed into the jungle

When the British arrived, Major Thomas Rogers
shot at least FIFTEEN HUNDRED
averaging one every day for four years.

Elephants never forget,
even ghost elephants, and someplace
in Elephant Valhalla
they chase down the ghost of Major Rogers
and every day
they rip off his arms and legs.

Brave Baby

To make the baby boy brave,
the father bends, scurries, carries him
under the elephant's belly,
the Malagawa, of the Temple at Kandy,
straightest back, longest ivory tusks,
hugest, most perfect elephant in Sri Lanka
tethered only by its enormous right hind foot.

Colombo Dogs

Sri Lanka

Colombo dogs lie in the streets,
nonchalant, walk away slowly.
When traffic's horns become too clamorous,
know the good Buddhists and Hindus
won't run over them. They prowl
through garbage, are lean. Live
in packs, beget huge numbers of progeny;
the bitches die young, their teats dragging.

On holidays the religious folk make sugar water
to feed the ants. They cook rice, serve it out
for the crows who shit all over everything,
screech obscenities at the hands that feed them.

The war wounded wear their pants rolled up
to show where their legs end, wear no shirts
to show where their arms should have been.

Orange-clad monks clamor
in front of peace-keepers' headquarters
every day, protesting terms of the cease-fire.
Pity is an orphan here.

What Seems to Be Vanishing

Sri Lanka

Troops of Grey Langurs
leap through
twilight.
To catch them,
even with your eyes,
is like trying to net
the silver mist.

They are gone
so swiftly,
you are not sure
you saw them.

They may be lost dreams,
old griefs,
all those good ideas
you never wrote down,
or the ghosts of all those old teachers
whom you meant to thank

and never did.

Offering to the Leopard

Yellow roadside sign warns:
Elephant Crossing,
but we are scouting for leopard.
As sun drifts down the west,
we see him on high rocks, royal head
resting on his regal paws, surveying the jungle,
reading the evening menu.
His yellow eyes slide across me,
his expression non-committal.
I think he is an editor.

The guide asks me if the fat German woman
can borrow my binoculars.
She watches him a long time, the two
of them gazing at each other.
I can hear his shriek, hear hers —
it isn't over till the fat lady screams.
I ask for the glasses back. She doesn't thank me.
I offer her to the leopard, her and her obese
husband.
When the jeep jounces back to the gates,
a tribe of silver Grey Langurs frisk
through the dusk, their names,
Agility and Grace.
Leopard is Lust and Appetite.
From a distance, I love him.

Black Leopard

He who has changed his spots,
melanoma coalesced, rosettes contracted
becomes shadow, moonless night
black ghost. Solitary, slouched across a limb
overhanging the game trail, waits
for a Grey Langur to leap into view.
or a Sambar Deer, though when hungry
eats rodents, reptiles, insects, birds, even fish
someone else has caught.

Leaps 20 feet horizontally,
Jumps almost ten feet,
runs 36 miles per hour.

grunts, roars, growls
like a petulant husband,
purrs when satisfied,
happy husband.
He's a cat,
he's beautiful, dangerous,
just like you used to be.

Dazzling
the Star Tortoise

endangered,
her carapace of six brown mounds called scutes,
yellow stars on the peaks, their rays spilling
down the brown slopes,
the shell's margin patterned
like the hems of quilts in half stars.
Meandering through dry grass,
the Star Tortoise is not utilitarian in any way;
she is only about beauty.
Her very presence says,
To carry the burden of stars
on my back:
My Privilege
and My Duty.

Dazzling
[another version]

Let us celebrate stars: The Big dipper,
the Little Dipper, The Bear, Sirius, Orion's Belt,
and Movie Stars:
John Travolta, Meryl Streep, Alec Guiness.
Stars of the silent screen:
John Barrymore, Pola Negri, Charlie Chaplin.

Let us not even think about stars
of reality television or rock stars.

We will consider instead the excellence
of the Star Tortoise of Sri Lanka, endangered,
her carapace of six brown mounds called scutes,
yellow stars on the peaks, their rays spilling
down the brown slopes,
the shell's margin patterned
like the hems of quilts in half stars.
Meandering through dry grass, brown and gold,
the Star Tortoise is not utilitarian in any way.
Her very presence says,
To carry the burden of stars
on my back: My privilege
and My Duty.

1/23/2017

Stars Up
Star Tortoise, *tharuka ibba*

Slow, slow in tropical heat,
dry areas, scrub forests,
Star Tortoise ambles.
Antediluvian white pebbled legs,
shell armored with bosses,
topped with yellow stars,
star-rays threaded from the peaks of the scutes.
flared border of star triangle rays.

Beautiful and protective
to carry Lord Vishnu reincarnated
in Shiva temples. Good luck, benisons
if Tortoise takes up residence in your garden.
Eats grasses, prickly pear, fallen fruit, flowers.
Monks proffer lettuce.

Tipped over flat on its back,
Tortoise persistent,
determined that stars must be on top,
struggles, most dexterous of all turtles,
rights itself,
walks sedately onward
toward where the sweet, crushed star
fruit lies.

Dogs in Syria

A society where to be a dog
is to be lower than dirt, lower
than worms in the dirt,
lower than shit.
A whole country without dogs
until traveling north through
the Orontes Valley, at the edge
of a smoldering dump grounds,
two: Thin, black and tan;
their tongues hang out
like their wolf ancestors,
guilt in their gait,
trotting fast, knowing
even in refuse they are scum,
trying to stay alive.

Envy

A pair of sinister Ivory Billed Toucans
flap across the pond, perch on dead branches;
little Bee-Eater, a flying jewel, blue, green, yellow,
flits;
perky Tailor Bird investigates the bougainvillea;
and the Ashy-Headed Laughing Thrush,
who lives in the neighbor's hedge, snickers at me
every morning as I walk by.
Such a burst of birds, flocking, singing, calling,
a great rustling of feathers.

They know they're superior
to creatures like me
who think terrestrially,
and walk on heels of iron.

Tip-Toeing the Mine Fields
Bird Census during the Civil War
Sri Lanka

The birds don't know the civil war, the zones,
the safe, or dangerous. They fly the old
highways of the air. Their hollow bones
imprinted with the ancient maps they've known

for centuries. The storks from Turkey, chat
(pied bush), long-legged golden plover, curlew,
sandpipers, Malabar hornbill, babet,
parakeet. Craters where their forage grew.

A soldier draws the secret paths among
minefields. Cautious on paddy dikes, old priest
records the feathered innocents, defenseless.
Writes down pintail ducks, spoonbills, blue heron
Science must go on. He records brown geese
between the nervous bombs, takes the census!

In Sri Lanka

Through mined rice paddies
the old priest walked the map
a government soldier gave him
to take the bird census.

He loved the storks from Turkey,
from Albania, Romania, all the tourist birds
of Europe, even more,
all the secretive local birds
endangered, all. He did not neglect
to record the sparrow, although he knew

Outsiders despised the scraggly little scratchers

8/14/2017

Devil Bird
Forest Eagle-Owl of Sri Lanka

Ulama, ear tufts like antennae,
white breast, black bars curve
up like half a mouth preserved,
half gone — feathered claws to rend a

a monkey, rat, snake. The island's
largest owl, almost two feet tall,
wingspan most a yard. Its call —
larger than its body. Its demand

a prophecy, a midnight warning:
Someone dear will die. The owl knows
from hidden sources, *ooooh-oh, oooo-oh*
ooooh-oh, the last gurgle churning.

You don't know what the owl knew.
So say your prayers that you don't dream
the devil bird's predicting scream:
someone will die. It could be you.

OOOO-OH, OOOO-OH, OOOO-OH!

Only Hunger and Sex
Spot-billed Pelican, Beira Lake, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Dark spots down his upper mandible
a spotted pouch, quite pink, expandable.

Five feet long. He dips upside down,
tips his tail in air when fishing. Brown

and greyish feathers. Courting, pelican wing-jerks
his lungs' only sounds, low, harsh barks.

After the wedding he turns silent,
all his vocal usage spent.

Long neck, no curve Hind head crest
sticks up, Butch cut. He builds a nest

quite casually, a few sticks suffice.
Only parents could find the hatchlings* nice,

white down covered, they squawk
when hungry (they always are) their only talk.

Pelican speaks twice in life, only words
of hunger, sex oil his vocal cords.

Speech not anything he wishes.
All sufficient, he fills his pouch with fishes.

Note
The draft reads "hatchings."

Lucky Sparrow of Sri Lanka

Bathe in streets, flip themselves with dirt,
cheerful, despite they're poor, chatter,
cheep, unaware they're nothing expert.
Unaware that they don't matter.

Bravest male finds house's interstices
safe spaces — wall to roof, narrow
slit, sheltered from monsoon, but nice
doors for geckos and brave sparrows.

He gathers tough stems, pulls dry roots
fashions the domed architecture
bottom of nest. His calls now suit
spring's imperative sexual lure.

Displays, shivers his wings, spreads tail
puffs out his chest, shows his black badge.
Female loves a badge, her colors pale
her soft, dee-dee-dee, answers as

consent — Now they build together,
in — out. Middle layer, leaves, grass,
lining, soft, old paper, feathers.
Search hedges, gardens, scavengers.

Buddha smiles on those who don't renounce
him. Bravest birds build inside. (No fear)
And bring good luck upon that house,
nesting on the chandelier.

Rare Romp
Sri Lanka's River Otter

The *Diya-balla*, fisher, diver,
swims under water a quarter of a mile,
comes up splashing, self-satisfied smile
on his tomcat face. Acrobatic as a seal,
clown who loops the loop,
plays catch-me-if-you-can, toboggans
down muddy river banks on his white belly,
his group so lively, they're named a romp,
gobbles a slow fish, slips into his holt*
smooth as oil into a bottle.

Note
holt: Although this looks like a typo, it is the correct word for the otter's den. The word itself has a slippery sound.

Just Trying to Get Along
Sri Lanka's Sloth Bear

Exemplar of diversity, not sloth,
although
hangs upside down
from branches.
Only bear with a long tail.

Hunts all night. **NOISY EATER**
shocks jungle's silence for 180 meters or more,
huffs ant and termite mounds;
RACKET SUCKING

Females not formal at table;
regurgitate "bear's bread"
for their young, a mixture of jack fruit,
wood apples and bits of honeycomb,
hardened into circular yellow disks.
Wanniyala-Aetto natives steal it, eat it.

Prolix: barks, screams, grunts, moans,
snarls, whickers, woofs, yelps, shrieks, yowls
and whimpers.
Melodious during mating season.

Not one of the beautiful creatures:
shaggy pelt, lumbering walk,
stretches his long lower lip up over the edge
of his nose!
Illegal bear farms where they're catheterized
repeatedly, or butchered for their gall bladders,
$1,500 dollars, (Chinese aphrodisiac),
great paws considered a delicacy,
cut off one by one as ordered by the gourmet
in Japan.

Sloth Bear, gentle
ridiculous cartoonist's figure,
night wandered, **BIG TALKER**, anomaly
of construction, just trying to get along
from one dark
to another.

The Hazard of Bears

A sloth bear is not a sloth,
a mouse deer is not a mouse,
nor is the deer mouse a deer.
The house mouse is not a house,
nor is the house sparrow.
The English language turns in, turns inside out,
ambushes itself, moves in metaphor and out,
curves like the scimitar claws
of the sloth bear, who is unique
among bears, having only 40 teeth,
which is more than enough for all the creatures
he bites. The teddy bear is not a teddy,
nor a bear. He has no teeth, never bites.
A bear market can devour you, however.
    Oh, language, how duplicitous,
    how full of lovely lies, how bear dangerous.

No Horns, No Trophy

Meeminna, miniature, toy Mouse Deer, one foot
    tall:
velvety buff brown coat, striped or
spotted white as if embroidered with silk.
Beauty is his country and Caution his
house and home. By daylight he snuggles down
in jungles where spotlights of sunshine
freckle the foliage-strewn floors.

His severed head is not displayed in Sri Lanka's
    villas
for Meeminna has no horns, no great candelabrum
    racks
THE GREAT HUNTERS
must have wild boar with his murderous tusks,
water buffalo's horns of homicide,
slithering leopard's rosette pelt to prove
hunters superior to the hunted.

Meanwhile, Mouse Deer, wary of the mongoose,
of dogs, feral cats that stalk him, slips through
lazy shadows, relieved to be left out
of The Elect, emerges at dusk to
The Edge of the World on Horton Plane, browses
    on
delicate grasses. Startled, he leaps back
to obscurity, writing half-ovals
on the silvery air.

Red Ants, the Army, During the Civil War
Colombo, Sri Lanka

In military formation, the pin-
head size red ants find a way inside, some
secret tunnel under locked French doors. In
single file they march towards any crumb

dropped from my breakfast. Now they find the fly
I killed, blue-black and dead upon the floor.
Six break ranks and hoist the corpse on high
above their heads, march it out — omnivores!

(They're not good Buddhist vegetarians —
I thought they munched on toast and marmalade.)
The fly looks like it's floating smooth as cream,
and I almost expect Wagnerian
music for the funeral. A good parade.
In this country nothing is what it seems.

Beautiful Eyes

The Slender Loris, Grey Loris, Rusty Loris
a double abecedarian

Arboreal, the Slender Loris walks (no running razzamatazz)
branches, holding tight with all four paws, very
carefully. Chipmunk size, weighing 3 to13 ounces, he's no chatterbox.
Dark face mask across the nose, he wears a built-in shadow.
Eyes close-set like glassy marbles — eyes, the Loris' *leitmotiv*
frames its hunted life, though he's innocent. His favorite menu:
Glistening black acacia ants whose bites can numb a fat
human's arm, and for other toxic insects, he laps up roaches,
investigates flower petals for beetles, is convivial, familiar,
joins other Loris for grooming. Minds the P and Q.
Knits his way across tree tops, palm top,
little, but he knows dexterous sexual positions (Sri Lanka's not Ohio),
mates hanging from branches upside down.
Namen spot on Grey Loris' forehead marks him
of the *Ayyavashi* worshippers. Has whistling, cheeping call,
plays at wrestling. Although he lives in families, no sleek
queen or portly kings, no one serves as Loris Raj.
Riding on their mothers' waists, baby Loris wears Loris mufti,
snuggles, becomes his own baby carrier in the high
tree canopy. Sinhalla name, *Thavangue,* for his pencil-thin leg,
understood as synonym for rickety child. Rusty Loris, reddish-buff,
very nearly extinct from natives clearing the forests and from dominate
witches who swing them by their back legs over fires of brush and wood,
excising their eyes for love potions and for a homiletic,
yellow paste for eye remedies, its usefulness not proved in any lab.
Zebra orchids look paradise, but Loris trembles (Sri Lanka isn't Shangri La).

Geckos in Love

I thought they came to eat
gnats and mosquito meat,
but they call each to each
primitive, plaintive squeaks.
Skittering on ceiling, neat,
dinosaur heads, complete
dragon bodies, sticky feet.
Even upside down, sex is sweet

Doing it on the Ceiling [another version]

I thought they came to eat
gnats and mosquito meat,
but they call each to each,
primitive, plaintive squeaks
across the ceiling. They skitter, meet,
prehistoric body to body, neat
dinosaur heads, all dragon complete.
Geckos in love. They link their sticky feet.

1/23/2017

Spider

When you dangle from a filament
of your own spinning, when
you build a lacy tenement
for your hundred children
I admire your silken art,
respect your mythic ancestry,
but I cannot like your poison part
or suffer you in my pantry.

Self-Contained

Water Monitor of Sri Lanka

Little dragon-lizard, gray with yellow leopard spots,
forked purple ribbon tongue, propels himself
by his oaring tail in tidal rivers, swamps.
Hangs out beside pandanus groves.
At the seashore dines on crabs, turtle eggs.
No gourmet, he also eats sand rats.
On Poya nights of the mating moons,
he rises on his hind legs to battle rivals.
When necessary uses his tail as flail,
powerful weapon of defense. He knows what he knows —
his own ancient noontime, moontime business —
doesn't whine, equivocate, or seek revenge, swims easy
and complete in his sleek, rubbery wet suit.

Pissed Off
wal ura in his wallow

Eats like a pig, the Wild Boar —
whole gardens, rabbits, meat, omnivore

Mean and ugly, not Apollo
luxuriates in his muddy wallow.

Mohawk cut mane elevated
along his back when irritated.

Beady eyes, close set in brindled hair,
can't see well or hear. Don't care.

Picks fights, grunts, snorts, huffs,
bitches, grouses *hkh ukh ukh ukh.*

Pissed off at lesser creatures, wimps
and weaklings, all impotents.

Before April rut, grows armor
and longer tusks; he's no charmer.

Gores opponents, that's his pattern,
celebrates in Porcine Latin —

victory cry: *guee, guee, guee, guo.*
You don't like it? Sorry you!

Copulates — easier than sneezes,
and does everything he damn well pleases.

The Hungry Wife
Photuris

Macho firefly flashes, dances, tacks.
Lady firefly flashes him back,
"For my tea, you're the whole cup;
You're so sweet, I could just eat you up.
I've no time to kid; I don't kid."
And after the mating, she did, she did.

Speaking from the Dead
Purple-faced Leaf Monkey
SERIOUSLY ENDANGERED

Rides the tree-tops, swings, dares, jumps
from leaf to leaf, limb to limb.
Blackish brown, patch of silver rump,
— all you'll see is shade that hides him.

White sideburns combed back, beard he's
proud of, face black, but through foliage
purplish, perhaps, and to his knees
wears white "trousers." He forages,

perches, reclines, copulates,
eats breakfast, lunch and dinner
on his leafy dining table plates.
No manners. Not for him, not her.

Special stomach's cafeteria
to his symbiotic bacteria.

Fights other males for his harem,
protects six to eight and their young.
Loud bark, (sounds like leopard) scares them.
Hollars, Whoops, WHOOPS when he's won.

But natives still crave monkey meat.
Farms nibble at his habitat
his trees, trunks, limbs, table, bed, seat,
endangered. They would take all that.

But even after his demise
he speaks through Geta Bera drums,
his voice alive, but in disguise!
Dancers' drumhead whispers, thrumms.

Toddy Cat

The Common Palm Civet, not a shrunk-skunk,
has scent glands, but's cousin to the weasel.
His white fur mask like a watch's bezel
circles his eyes. Eats fruit, insects, eggs, climbs —
into palm tree's crown of limber limbs —
where fermented flower sap's on tap,
imbibes, and totters, a drinker, a stinker.
Drunk as a skunk,
palm civet cat skunk-drunk! Skunk-drunk!

Riding the Water Buffalo

Tough blue-black hide, a few
sparse hairs, massive breast,
he lunches on water lilies, chews
river and savannah weeds, dressed

with curving horns that measure,
above his skull, a broken halo.
He knows how to make his leisure
in a muddy river wallow.

It's well known that no one can
ride a water buffalo, this cow
that will not learn to carry man,
and must be led to pull the plow,

and yet, the Taoist, Lao Tzu,
rode one out through Hangu Pass,
And thus philosophy subdued
this surly cow's refractory mass.

Cat Naps

Great gray ships steamed into Liverpool from
Egypt,
carrying tons of cat mummies,
pulverized and sold as fertilizer for the roses
of England: pearl-white Moonlight;
coral edged Escapade; blowsy pink Mary Rose;
Proud Titania; Mountbatten; Passion Park,
and the other reds, all these blessed by Bastet,
the cat goddess. Now Egypt in England,
the Island part of the Mainland.

Mummy wrappings used for paper making,
human mummy dust used to stop bleeding
of wounds, and English cats lay down
in the shade of roses made rich by Egypt,
dreaming of the days when they were gods.

The Lean Cats of Izmir

The lean cats of Izmir
sit on the shore licking their fur
as Agamemnon's tired crew pulls
into the cove; they crouch, waiting
for scuttling vermin as Alexander's men
overturn brown boulders to build the walls
and turrets of Ephesus. They watch with topaz
insouciance while Cleopatra rides,
her chariot decked with dog roses,
to meet Marc Antony. Their slit onyx eyes
observe Hadrian's temple crumble.
They singe their fur in their green vigil
as the old port of Smyrna burns.
They are practical cats, patient,
and their tourmaline claws are ready.

Waiting for the Fire
Damascus

Shepherds in long striped cloaks
guide their woolly charges through cacophonous
traffic
toward the Umayyad Mosque
where they tether the bleating creatures
near the doors for the Feast of the Eid.

Lambs sorrowful eyes seem to know
that concrete avenues, high stone walls
bode them no good. Even the family
who takes one home in the back of the pick-up
clasped between the mother, grandmother
and the children, will give it only the ritual prayer
and then the ritual knife, one quick slice
across the throat, blood on the sidewalk,
cleaned quickly, and then the living coals.

How to Hunt Wild Animals
for those who shoot from helicopters

Herds of gazelles, sand-colored dancers
leap across the desert, but their delicate legs
cannot outrun
Land Rovers driven by the young princes,
white *kafiyahs* thrown back from their eager faces.
High-powered rifles aim; blood spatters the desert;
prize heads decapitated; carcasses abandoned,
bloat in the sun for buzzards, kites. Buffalo Bill's
ghost
oversees the slaughter. He has not witnessed
so much gore since he murdered the Nebraska
buffalo.
The oryxs' mounted heads and horns adorn
desert palaces. The princes live well, learn to
shoot
the mountain ibex from helicopters.

The golden desert rabbit huddles in its den;
jerboa hastily drinks its morning dew,
even the viper and sand cobra shudder.

Jerboa

Its leaps should be set
to the flageolet
Marianne Moore

Dear Jerboa, Dr. Jassim Al Hassan,
ecologist, doesn't know why you came
to the petroleum lake formed when unburned
crude
drizzled out, left its tracks down the wadies
when someone torched pipelines, doesn't know
why
you waded in to die. Marianne wrote
that you were happy, content with your poverty —

so it must have been curiosity. Or perhaps the oil
smelled of pheromones, and you were undone
by sexual desire like so many others.
Now your silk whiskers are leaded with tar,
and your Chippendale paws clutch air.
Small, cheerful rat, who asks for almost nothing,
drinking no water even in this desert,
there are not enough riches
in this world to satisfy the greed of the mighty.

They would take everything,
even the sevenths and intervals
of your long leaping kangaroo dance
and the single seed you need
for your daily meal.

Lifting the Mediterranean Sun, June 2009

Tartus, Syria

Fog in the harbor at Tartus,
the stiff necks of the great cranes swathed in grey
veils.
Two small boats creep toward Award Island.
Ghost ships hang on the horizon,
waiting for the Harbor Master's permission.
They might be Phoenician craft, home from
Cyprus
with beaten gold and alabaster,
or Antony's doomed fleet, although Antony doesn't
know it,
or Crusader ships, the soldiers in their righteous
armor,
ignorant of the silks of Syria, its carpets woven
with figures of carnations, roses, vines,
peacocks and antelope.

On Munzer's modern balcony,
before me, the shush, shush of the sea
behind me the shush of Munzer's automatic
washer,
and here I am,
directing the morning's debut,
urging the sun,
and at eight o'clock the shepherd girl,
wrapped in her black abayah,
comes on her donkey with 100 brown sheep.

The Whisperer

It suits giraffes to appear mute
When they play, they tussle; males wrestle
six hundred pounds of muscles each,
intertwine.
No insults, grunts; dominance peaceful,
benign.
No drama for the winner; loser
walks away without a murmur.

Some old folks say, like lispy breeze
through the lacey weaves
of acacia leaves' whiskers
giraffes speak soft in tongue-twister
whispers, whispers.

Polecat as "Wild Indian" Dancer

Mustela Putorius

European polecat is not a skunk,
belongs to the family weasel,
white stripes along a black trunk.
Has to be wary of owls, sea eagles.

So secretive, lives in old burrows
dug out by badgers and foxes.
about size of a cat, only more narrow,
can slide into smallest opening slots.

Eats and hunts rabbits, loved by McGregor
and all his ilk. Defends with two scent glands,
rising on front paws and lifts his posterior;
then shoots ten feet from where he stands.

He's also dancer, prancer, twirling pern,
jumps in the air, revolves, and becomes
limber as licorice; "Wild Indian" turns,
moving to silent music, his different drum.

Noisy Black Rhino

For breakfast, lunch and dinner, she munches
with pointed lip on leaves, twigs, branches.
Her armor is the one-inch folds of hide
that's holding cooling water close inside.
(In Dürer's woodcut, because he'd never seen it,
on rhino's side mistaken armor rivets.)
The males weigh in about two tons and half
Females at one and half, the newborn calf
more than three hundred. Family plays
with sticks in mouth. Hot afternoons they lay
in muddy wallows, keeping cool, the clay
adheres and makes a practical sundress.
In rhino circles, a Dior success.
In snout-honks, tongue-pants, and throat-shrieks,
vocabulary rich, loud, plus soft squeaks.
No dictionary for their common speech.
They bob their massive heads to meet to greet.
A single horn, classifier Linneaeus,
named him rhinoceros unicornis.
Though accurate, this caused mistakes, of course;
this massive beast is not a mythic horse.
The horn, not ivory, only keratin,
but costly as diamonds have always been,
and tempting to poachers' ruthless attacks
for a mistaken Asian aphrodisiac.

Orange Iris Owl in Borneo's Rainforest
double abecedarian

Although this tiny ball of fuzz
became fugitive more than one hundred twenty
counted years gone past, no x
determined where she flew and found new
evergreens with owl holes. No record of her habit,
her leitmotiv
forgotten. Anew she had to find shelter, mate,
become her own guru,
giving herself advice. She hid, secretive, so
science thinks she's extinct.
Her rainforest is tangled hooks of thorns, vines,
limbs becoming stumps
indeed, and even these blasted out to reorder
jungle landscapes for coconut tree oil to sell in the
world's suq,
keeping owls' habitat for a rich developer at sleep,
lying easy as a fledgling fed well on a juicy
mosquito.
Many flies, beetles, mosquitos, the forest buzzing,
sun or rain,
numbering a 1000 or more on one tree, chirp,
click, hum
over and over, repetition and rhythm for gnats
dancing in a swirl.
Plethora of insect eggs on leaves, millipedes.
Chan's walking stick
quiet as the owl, except when she hoots,
celebrating hunt, this tiny Raj,
royal insect eater, one of the scopes, Latin name,
Otis brookii.
She has safely kept her secrets buried in the
tangled underbrush,
tendrils like snakes, leaves big as platters, too
dense for walking.
Under all, between or above, Raj blends in,
feathers striped in buff.
varied with white, her unique beauty, the orange
iris of her enormous eye
watching for insects, or darting after the thousand
flies, or ants picked
expertly off the almost hidden floor where they
picnic.
Zoned tropical, her place loud with metronome of
world's largest cicada.

Horses, Home in Spirit Lake, Iowa

And Allah took a handful of wind,.. and said to it, "I create thee, Arabian."

Ishmael knew the secret words
and all the wild horses ran towards him, put their manes beneath his hand,
yielded themselves to his will
Commanding the winds, he knew, "the best
place on earth is the back of a running horse."
The horses of the wind fly without wings.

At home in Spirit Lake, Iowa,
the slim yachts drive into the foam, crew
tugs at the sheets, leans out from the gunnels
for balance, only the narrowest line
of hull hissing, knife edge against water,
and the only song is the wind's bright song,
not high-pitched
and sweet as the *mujajil* of a red Arabian.

The Prophet prohibits cutting off manes,
tails, forelocks, "because their tails act as whisks;
their manes warm them, and their forelocks are blessed."

The mainsail, jib, and blessed mizzenmast —
there is no day like today — eighteen knots, gusts
out of north by northwest, waves high, judges' red boats
bobbing at the course markers, decks covered
with spray, swift as the animal brought by
Gabriel on the night of ascension
to the seven heavens, white, oh *shabah*,
with a chest of rubies.

When I think of all the races, water
and desert, elements of fire and earth
beneath wind and water, wagers I've made,
that we all make, the roads of sand and sea,
parted, dividing, taking you, good friends,
Wayne and Kay, to Brasilia; dear David
and Judy to Kuala Lumpur; Don,
gone deaf now, to the little house beside
rough brown boulders of Maine; Lita, living
next to the soft marshes of Florida; Trudy and her Dave
on the Chesapeake, the golf course stretching its octopus arms
behind their pink brick house; Kathleen, happy
and unhappy in Paris, one or two
I loved, but could not love enough, lost now,
lying where nothing can touch them today,
nothing but these salty, futile kisses.

I listen to the gallop of enchanted horses,
the gallop of wind which blows where it will
through the red mane, the white spray,
across deserts and grasslands, coming at last
to the sacred lakes, to the house at the shore,
the centrifugal center where all is calm,
where wind and water become the same element,
where I can hear someone singing a song
sweeter than the *mujajil.*

Bad Dream Dogs

Yipping at my nerves, English Spaniels,
Cockers, Clumbers, pulling twisted nerve skeins
from inside my spine, gnawing the frayed ends
they loosen tips from my fingers and toes,
strew the bloody strings on the pavement.

A miniature white poodle's curled ruff quivers
while it chews my hair, its wild blue eyes expand,
rotate like friction wheels throwing off sparks,
its pointed teeth wet with poisonous saliva;
its high pitched yelp rasps raw thoughts,
reduces them to static.

Oh, dispatcher of dreams, send
instead great snowy egrets, panda bears
shyly munching bamboo, zebras with Mondrian
black markings. Where are the soft pads
of leopards loping across the savannas?
spiraling eagles of the air?
elephant of goodness and peace?

Can you spare llamas and camels to carry away
the burdens of the day, guard geese
and good gorillas to patrol
against the terrors of the night?
I need the dragonfly, living jewel of happiness,
and the water strider, miraculous,
walking on the pond's dark water.

Former Lives

The first time I went to Jim Mulac's place,
his dog loved me, recognized me,
from another life. Maybe he had been my dog,
in Switzerland when we rescued travelers
trapped in snow slides,
or in Scotland where we kept sheep
on the cool, heather hills.
Maybe he was my dog when we drove cattle
from Amarillo to Dodge,
or maybe he was an old lover
come back for one more embrace.

Baby, Sheba, Boomer, and the Relatives
Sestina

I tried to like Stan's dogs; I'd toss the ball
to them, but they'd yelp, yike, fight. At last
I gave up. All mean, and Baby's too much like
Aunt Lizzie.
Every time I show my face she looses a volley of
barks;
When Lizzie comes, she fires off a barrage of
scandal.
Stan babies Baby, says she can't help it —
buckshot

from a neighbor scared her brain, buckshot
scarred her coat. Both she and Lizzie bawl
over what happened years ago. Lizzie remembers
scandal
to drive me staring crazy — right up until the last
when she is ninety. (She doesn't let up.) Her bark
is worse than her bite, Stan says. But Lizzie's

gossip spares no one, is the juiciest in town.
Lizzie
doesn't like Stan's wife. "Her brain's like buckshot;
it rattles around in her head. She charms the bark
off trees, the pants off men. She's having a ball
sleeping with the hired man. Their last
one left, all worn out. That's enough scandal

for divorce, but Stan won't file. You'd think
scandal'd
shame him — and Sheba's like Stan's wife."
Lizzie
won't say "bitch." — says, "a flirt to the last,
a collector of suitors. Stan ought to get a gun,
buckshot
and throw the fear of God and BBs into them.
Bawling
won't help. Tie Sheba, lock up Marcia, even if
they bark

or scream. Sheba thinks she's some exotic
queen. Her barks
remind me of Cousin Myrna Ladkey yelping over
scandal.
she keeps at least three stories going — like
juggler's balls.
"I tell the gospel truth. Boomer's an idiot," Lizzie
says, "like Hanson who married Agatha. Buckshot
didn't have any effect on him. He was the last
kid out of Miller's melon patch. Got peppered last
but went again the next night. That's Boomer. He
barks;
gets sprayed by skunk; does it again. If it were
buckshot
he'd be leaky as a sieve. Couldn't hold scat or
scandal.
He thinks he's king of the hill, god of the field,"
Lizzie
complains. The last time I saw her, she wanted a
brawl

after her last breath — her diaries published!
Scandal
barking up every tree. But writing isn't talking,
Lizzie,
yours isn't buckshot or bullets; yours is dead
tennis balls.

3/13/2017

Great Creatures

"Drop it," I yell at Boomer who's shaking a
woodchuck
as if it were an old dust mop. He hesitates,
finally releases his steel trap jaw.
Woodchuck on the way down leaves hieroglyphics
on Boomer's ear. I wrap it in my bandana.
He hates it; pulls it off.
In the truck I tuck a towel around his head;
he's a Weimaraner swami. Blood soaks down,
fashions a rusty vest.
It's eight o'clock before I get into Fergus Falls
to old Doc Anderson who pulls himself away from
a *National Geographic* special. "Sixteen moose in
tonight's show,"
he snorts, "And here I am with a dumb Nazi dog."
Boomer's so scared his breath comes in heaves. I
hold
his muzzle shut. "An artery," Doc says, "goes
around
the perimeter here." He shoots in Novocain, sews
with his needle-nosed scissors, but Boomer
shakes his head, blood flies. The office
looks like a vampire's banquet hall.
"We'll have to put him under," Doc says. I lift
him up on the shiny table, Boomer, gasping now.
Doc brings out a vial of anesthetic big enough
for an elephant. In seconds Boomer relaxes
like a shirt in the wash. His tongue lolls out,
a wide, wet, pink ribbon. His saliva,
clear as innocence, makes a saucer
in the stainless steel. Doc sews quickly
and surely now. Then I carry Boomer
like a sack of potatoes to Doc's back room
and put him in a cage till morning.
"Moose," Doc complains, "I was watching
some of the truly great creatures
of this earth." And Boomer stirs, stretches,
murmurs as if he were dreaming of the big hunt.

Cerulean Secret
Cerulean Warbler, endangered

Secret, only a flash of cerulean,
too high to be studied in the old oaks
above the Mississippi at McGregor.

Nest light as eiderdown,
light as milkweed floss,
only 0.3 ounces, luxury lined
with spider silk.

Daredevil female perches, jumps,
free-falls over the side, wings folded
till safe below the branch

International, neotropical, migrates
the Mexican flyway
to coffee plantations in the winter Andes,
stitching the hemispheres together.

A buzzed song, untranslatable,
maybe a Peruvian rainforest lay.
zray, zray, zray, rising zeeeee,
maybe Mississippi River jazz,
zee, zee, zee, zizizizi eet!

1/18/2019

Meadowlark

Meadowlark, this is the penultimate song.
You sing memories brought back on the ephemeral
reed in your splendid yellow throat with its black cravat,
the sweet song of the ones who have left forever.
To remember Vivian, tuning her violin
to your notes, even that last day,
and Lowell, voice of water testing the creek's pebbles,
Mother, humming, picking strawberries, her old straw hat askew,

O lark, lark, so many with songs stopped
forever in their throats. You, too have terrible losses,
so few left to sing your song, song that makes sorrow lift
like the fog, disappears in the clean, cold air.
In the fields where the behemoths roll over you,
over the pheasant, wild turkey, sharp tailed grouse,
quail, and bob-o-link, prairie chicken with her brood of twelve.

There must be a song in the winds that pass over,
that undreams the land and opens the music
from the graves, that allows the escape of the old gods,
even Coyote, even Old Jackrabbit thumping the earth for a drum,
even the Buffalo, the redstone pipes whose smoke still perfumes
the wind of the prairie. There must be a song that forgives
the dead and the dying, the shy, the poor, the prodigals,
and ignorant, the greedy, the good, even the ragged traveler,
the wounded veteran limping home from the war.
O fragile nester close to the black earth, let your silken throat speak
for the forgotten, the dear ones, for the cottonwood trees,
for lilies, for fragile feathered wings.
Inspire the gracious grass
to break open the stones and sing.

1/10/2019

Wild Canaries
in Coe College's garden

Among the plumes of *Anis Hyssop,*
like small yellow leaves
they flit, rearrange themselves
on swaying stems: goldfinches, artless,
in their quick forays among the purple blooms,
plucking the seeds of purity,
robbers forgiven, made innocent,
before the almighty August sun.

1/23/2019

Red-winged Blackbird
spring song

Safe in the swamp,
tilting on reeds,
wavy water shivers with song,
air shimmers
sliced by flight of yellow and red chevrons.
He perches on last year's cattails
sings to the dowdy lady, hidden.

Singing her lies.
She loves lies.

He has secrets.
She warms their secrets.

Spring bursts, explodes in spangles.

What do they know,
care,
that winter always comes?
What do they care?
They are young, alive,
feathered, flying,
and he, singing lyrical lies.

Dreams like Feathers
His bill cocked, gimlet eyes
fasten on the terrified squirrel
flattened several branches below him,
but I think he's a Cooper's Hawk
after only the robins,
who have mistakenly stayed all winter,
kept alive on wizened crab apples.
Hawk finally lifts his head,
stares at us,
spreads his wings and coasts away
close to the snow. It is a hard winter
for hawks, for squirrels, for robins.
We are easy in our warm houses,
our wool sweaters, our feather beds
piled as high as snow drifts.
If anything ghosts through our dreams
it's only a phantasmagoria,
a quirk of the imagination, nothing
living or hungry or desperate.

Dreams Like Feathers
[another version]

Mel said, "Come see the owl."
February sun bright,
but it was no owl — a hawk, I thought
maybe a Cooper's.

His cruel bill cocked, gimlet eyes
fastened on the terrified squirrel
flattened several branches below him.
Or maybe he was after the robins,
who had mistakenly stayed all winter
keeping alive on wizened crab apples
while the worms are stiff in their burrows.

Hawk stared at us with his yellow eye,
finally spread his wings and coasted away
close to the snow. It was a hard winter
for hawks, for a squirrel, for birds.
We were easy in our warm houses
in our wool sweaters, our feather beds
piled as high as the snowdrifts.
And if any hawk ghosted through our dreams
it was only a phantasmagoria,
a quirk of the imagination, nothing
living or real or guilty.

Compadre

We didn't talk
Mel, Mary and I, sprawled, hiking-tired, content
on the porch, watching the slow dusk
enfold the mountains.
We said many things between us silently
that we all knew, all important
and the unsaid words hung there
in the pure, high air

A doe, mule deer, ears twitching,
appeared from the shadows,
strolled slowly toward us.
"I know, I know," her eyes told us.
She hesitated a moment
as if to join us on the benches,
but then passed on
into the darkness
where the evening star now appeared.

Dogs I've Owned

When I hear barking far away at night,
I remember dogs I've owned:
Skeeter whose high-pitched yelps
drove away the man with the stick:
Oscar who chased cars:
Bowser who tangled with a porcupine:
Boots, enormous police dog,
female, gentle, kind, so fearful of thunder,
she'd break her chain, poor panting beast,
run through the fence to escape,
burst through the hooked screen door, creep
behind
the kitchen range and cower there
while the storm muttered.

Colonel, sweet-tempered black lab
who grabbed the throat of Maxie Howser's
snarling chow and hung on till I could get him
away.*
I see him now, trembling,
eager to lick my palms
even when I had nothing to give him
but their salty sweat.

A hunter, he chased quail, catching them live
and depositing them at my feet
with royal generosity. Because of him
I can almost believe in the hound of heaven
pursing immortal souls as if they were birds
escaping into the tall grass,
flying low, skimming over the sumac.

Note
away: The original read "could get away." I am reasonably sure she intended "could get him away."

Walking on Bears
Effigy Mounds National Monument
for Nancy and John Peterson

Basswood leaves spin down, pulled loose
by the wind's hook. Ahead, the cliffs are painted
vermilion, maroon, burgundy, brown.
We stop at the stone foundation
of Mattie Johnson's cabin.
Beside the cavity of her front door
a few tattered lilacs paper the path
with heart-shaped leaves.
Her apple trees still bear,
and Mel jumps, pulls down a branch,
picks one for each of us.
We rub them clean on our jeans.
They're hard and cold on our teeth.
and we lick their tart juice from our fingers.
Far below the Mississippi's fog
coalesces, rises easy as ghosts or feathers
and blows away. From the cornfield
across the fence a coyote emerges,
fat with fall field mice, trots across the pasture
and disappears down a draw. The trail takes us
past
burial mounds shaped like snakes, like panthers,
like eagles big as back yards.
Seven bears march up the hill.
We walk gently on their sides where they're
sleeping.

October and the Coyote

Grey coyote slinks
across dry gully
autumn weeds buff and brown
what does he know
of winter coming,
lean months,
scarce weeks,
hungry days,
rabbits, moles, voles under ground
hunger on the hills, deep as snow.
Hieroglyphics of rabbit tracks
shadow skeletons of trees
retreated into themselves
everything reduced
to common denominator,
the bone that survives.

5/28/2019

Not Knowing Why

Adolescent white pelicans squawk, rustle, flap
their wings,
lift off in a ragged spiral at imaginary danger.
What danger on this island in the middle
of Spirit Lake? They're off to feel
the lift of wind under their iridescent wings,
because they were born to fly
because they have nothing else to do,
because wind and water are their elements,
their Bach, their Homer, Shakespeare,
and Spielberg. They wheel over the lake,
the little farms, the tourist village with their camera
eyes.

In autumn something urges
them toward Texas marshes. They follow
their appetites and instincts, unlike the small
beetles
creeping along geometric roads, going toward
small boxes,
toward lives as narrow or as wide as the pond,
as glistening or as gray as the sky.
They do not know why. They fly, they fly.

Note
This poem originally appeared in *The Coe Review.*
It was reprinted in Ted Kooser's column,
"American Life in Poetry" and in the chapbook,
Traveling Light.

Bear Speaks of Winter

Although I wake up hungry for the world,
for every young shoot I dig up,
for every silver fish in the roaring river,
and yes, although my fur is baggy,
the fat of fall consumed by winter,
the long lie-over is not loss to me,
but the gain of months
to dream, to contemplate
half asleep-half awake, ideas sifted
through the sieve of time and snow,
and finally to rise up with joy
in the sun, again the sun,
again the Lazarus morning.

Part 2

Poems from Digital Files

Butterflies on the Great Circle Lawn

Peradeniya Botanic Gardens
in 100 degree heat
two-hundred-nineteen first grade girls in white
uniforms
sit under the Java Fig Tree's branches
that stretch so wide they have to be propped up
with timbers.

I think the girls are white flowers
or white butterflies, or maybe
they are the ghosts of the ancient king's consorts,
ladies who lived behind high walls
and could look out only through barred windows.
Now they're free to run and skip,
to put their arms around trees,
to play hide-and-see, in the bamboo thicket.

They stir their rice and curry lunches
with slender brown fingers,
and lick them,
cool in the 190 square meters of shade.

1/18/2010

Time Out of Mind
for Stephen Meats

I sit on the porch, gaze out at the lake
dimpling from the shower, eating my toast,
drinking my coffee. A small wind tickles
the waves. No boats. A flock of gulls
far off wheels and falls, their feathers
glittering like confetti.

Not thinking, not reading, not working,
I rest here where the glacier rested,
letting go. Finches sing in the hackberry,
rain makes small music in the drainpipe.

5/13/2010

Milking Time

I like to think of words
from their original meanings,
from the ancient actions and old implements:
Versus, the plowman carving
a furrow across the field, turning up
the black soil, so black it shines blue
in the sunlight, while white gulls
follow him and his patient horse.
He reverses at the end of the furrow,
just as the poem comes back with another
meaning,
opened up and curling over itself,
verse, versus, reverse.

Virgil, returning to his farm,
brought the Muse into his own country
north of Rome, and wrote the *Georgics.*
Willa Cather, watching the plow silhouetted
against the Nebraska prairie sunset
remembered his lines, "Optima dies…prima fugit."
and my father, innocent of Latin,
calls the milk cows into the dusky barn,
"So boss, soooo boss, so bossy."

5/19/2011

Warning: Elephant Crossing
Sri Lanka

In 1890 when Dr. Peterson came by bullock cart
from Matara into the northeast
to establish his hospitals, a bugler went before
him,
blowing his horn to keep wild animals
off the road: the thirty thousand wild elephants,
the black leopards, sloth bears, mischievous
monkeys.

Today when I heard you were coming, I picked up
my bugle
played reveille, played every tune I knew,
and all the wild animals slunk back into the jungle
and cleared the road just for you.

10/5/2011

The Shining Edge of Everything

His little son beside him, the philosophy professor
pulls his big, black pickup over, halloos
at the crazy old poet walking in the twilight.
He is taking the boy beyond the city's lights
to the country to watch Venus rising.

The old poet trudges along, a fist full of stars
in her hand, stars caught like butterflies
from the deserts at Sharm el-Sheikh,
dipped from the waves of Okoboji,
and two tame ones that alighted on her fingers
like iridescent hummingbirds. Now she is almost
home.

And the boy will return with a planet,
shiny as a new marble, in his pocket.

2/8/2012

Guessing the Lion's Disposition

The excavated lion toppled on its side
in front of the library
at the University of Aleppo, Syria,
curved smile unmoved,
haunches drawn up, no matter
how uncomfortable all these thousand years.
I admire his restraint, his limestone patience.
I think he must be a Hittite,
but a friendly Hittite,
no bearded soldier with a mean lance,
no fearsome god with round white eyes.

This one's a tame lion, a lady's lion.
Maybe he's my lion,
waiting for me to set him upright,
to take him home with me
where he will break his silence
purr to the white cat that watches me
from the wall of the neighbors
who are also watching me.

2/9/2012

Blood and Guts

The jackal lives in a ziggurat, or maybe he lives in
a different room at the end of a different tunnel
every night. In the butcher shop in Al Jedayea,
smoked tongues laced together on strings hang
like deflated brown balloons. Maybe he has a
double or double doubles. He plays off Hamas,
Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah against each other.
Should he tell the old terrorists, "Gentlemen take
your bombs and go home, please."? As if their
home countries would take them back. As if
they'd go. Guns turn two ways. Garlands of
sausages, fatty-tailed sheep's tails, denuded,
stacked like ping-pong paddles. The jackal lives in
a ziggurat; he is not well, his heart hurts. Red and
gristle-blue carcasses suspended from iron hooks,
only a little smaller than the figures dangling from
the scaffold in Hanging Square. His lackeys report
every night on all his friends and enemies, and his
chest feels like it's swelling and about to burst.

2/9/2012

Bathing Discreetly
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Train creeps snail-like up the mountain,
roadbed degraded, tracks rough.
All around ferocious green jungle,
its creatures hiding from the racket,
only a girl in a red sarong
bathing discreetly beneath a waterfall.

2/9/2012

Silence

Verbs have flown, gone with the geese
to Mississippi, with white pelicans to Texas,
Nouns have sunk under water,
buried in the lake's mud where frogs,
hurrying toward hibernation, hopped across
the highway's lanes in the dark. Hundreds,
thousands,
smashed into a slick green smear.
Sparrows have swallowed conjunctions.
Adjectives were swept away with the wind
out of Ontario, and adverbs were harvested
with the golden corn, dried and stored
in bins. You never speak to me now
and there is nothing left
but dangling prepositions, hanging
like cones from the fir trees' tips.

10/5/2012

Docetism

The dodo, maligned for centuries
because it was docile, did not live
on the Dodecaness Islands, did not sing
in dodecaphonic phrases. While it did dodder,
still, it was not dumb, had adopted
the doctrine of Docetism,
so it is not really done for, but rather,
because it had no Dodo body
that could be put to death,
it is merely dormant,
may reappear in any dimension,
perhaps in different form.
Then dedicated Dodo aficionados
will dance in delight.

10/12/2012

Devil Dancing 2

King Coconuts, their lids lopped off, oil lit
for Poya night, yak bera drums beat out
a ritual so ancient no one sit-
ing here remembers what it's all about

except there's evil spirits to expunge
from Twitcher seated on the stool, possessed.
The dancers shuffle, gyrate, stomp, make puns
while moon sails on. No dancer will confess

he's guilty, till a child brings out the mask
with dagger teeth and cobra hair. Then Black
Dancer knows he's finished, his magic trash.
Holds out for cash before he will go back.

We all walk home, now safe and unaccosted
by evil ghosts we helped cast out, exhausted.

8/28/2013

Devil Dancing
Sri Lanka
[Another version]

King Coconuts, lids lopped off,
oil lighted, flames flutter like Buddhist banners.
Tonight ancient demons, jungle devils, plain bad luck
to be danced away, expelled, exiled.

Yak bera drums thump, Thump, THUMP.
Poya Night.
Poya Night.* Shadows slither,

and this Twitcher, twitching in his chair
is possessed. Notice his long and stringy hair.
(Twitcher is the one possessed.)
Dancers, Red, and White, old Baggy Black,
twirl, gyrate, shuffle, stomp, joke and kick,
gossip, risqué stories, bad puns, Hours pass.

Hours pass. Rituals so old their purpose ages ago whisked by the winds
suspended in the waves.

Pregnant Woman dances from the palm branch hut
(male gestating enormous pillow bulges beneath sarong).

Moon, or some small god, sails on. No one knows
which dancer is as wicked as the monsoon blows.
('Twitcher is the one possessed.)

Dancers appeal for sake of the family,
for sake of the village, sake of the sacred island.
A child brings out the devil masks,
TEETH like daggers, COBRAS WRITHE
from nostrils, ears, coiffure. Now it's clear. It's evident —
Evil Spirits are Baggy and Pregnant!
(They're the ones who wreak possess.)

Spiteful spirits,

Be Gone! Break your spell!
But they won't leave until Red Dancer waves a wad
of money, buys them off. Now Twitcher stands and bows,
his spirit returning to its rightful house.
(Cleansed. Unpossessed.)

You and I walk home slow, exhausted
from the hard work of casting out devils.

Oh, dancers, the scars of civil war green pus black blood
ooze ooooooozzzze
buried land mines
stumps of arms and legs
graveyard of the massacred orphans.

Still, still these wicked times.

Come back, devil dancers. Dance!

Note
*Poya Night — every full-moon night is a legal holiday in Sri Lanka.

10/4/2013

Dancing Out Devils
Sri Lanka

Evil spirits in the house, bad blood in the village,
civil war in the country, land mines, suicide
bombers,
assassinations,
and this one, twitching in his chair,
is possessed. Notice his long and stringy hair.
(I think we're all possessed.)

Red, Black, White sarongs--dancers dressed
for characters so ancient everyone's forgot
which gods, good or evil, they present.
Poya Moon, yak bera drums,
Beat, Beat, thump, thump.
Low caste dancers have no manners.
Coconut lids lopped off,
lighted oil flares like yellow Buddhist banners
Gyrate, shuffle, stomp, kick, joke, bad puns,
gossip, risqué stories, all the while, drums, drums,
drums,
the heart of the island thumping. Hours pass
Hours pass. Moon sails above or one of the gods.
No one knows.
No matter how we're dressed, we're all
possessed.

Poya night, Poya moon, Poya drums,
thump, thump, thump. Confess, confess.
He won't confess.
for the sake of the family, for the sake of the
village,
for the sake of the sacred island.
At last they dance the truth from grass.
Oh! It's you, Red dancer! spiteful spirit,
break your spell! get out! be gone! beat it!

Red kicks and screams and will not go.
White dancer waves a wad of money
buys off Red who exits cackling,
but he'll be back as sure as monsoons blow.
No matter how we're dressed,
we're all possessed, we're all possessed.

5/4/2017

Sparrow Speaks of Winter
No Bonus

We huddle under the eaves
of the New York Stock Exchange,
fluffing our feathers, Quaker grey
and brown, homely, not like the bright birds,
cardinals and jays. We are of no import —
not since Catullus have the poets written
about us, not even one little brown poem.

We flutter down
to the streets for crumbs from the table
where we are unworthy to eat,
chirp cheerfully even in the blast,
too innocent or bird-brained
to be callous, vindictive or greedy.

9/19/2013

Elephant Snot
Sri Lanka

For a small coin
to give me good fortune,
the local temple elephant
will wipe its trunk
on my hair
but I am not a believer.

12/3/2013

Mystery Bird
Red-Wattled Lapwing

Native name, onomatopoetic
for his call, "Did-he-do-it? Do-it?"

Perhaps, but waterweeds' green fence
hides even Sherlock's evidence.

12/3/2013

Showing Off
Pheasant-tailed Jacana

Loud "HAROORK, **HAROOK,** hrr, hrr,"
not musical, but also calls with kitten's purr.

Trots across the ponds on lily pads,
shows off. This—his personal bridge.

He doesn't swim. He doesn't need it
Legs are limber-long and balance perfect.

12/3/2013

Trophies

Hemingway comes back from Africa
with trophies: rhinoceros heads,
hippo's heads, Cape buffalo heads,
and that of Francis Macomber

In Sri Lanka leopard pelts
on the walls, crossed elephant tusks
above the mantle, mounted crocodile's head
wild boar, samba deer, sloth bear.
Hidden away in a cupboard somewhere
the fur of a gray langur, skin of a toque macaque.

In Deli in the maharajah's palace
the wall of tiger heads, their mouths open,
teeth white and sharp.

In Colorado at the Y camp
the head of Sampson, 12 points, pet elk,
killed by the poacher.

The hunters, who no longer hunt to live,
hunt to prove they are still hunters.
My mother, a gatherer, had her trophies, too:
100 glass canning jars of red tomatoes,
70 green beans, 23 rhubarb, 39 pickles,
both dill and bread-and-butter, 62 peaches,
50 applesauce, half gallon jars of grape juice,
jelly glasses with strawberry jam,
plum butter, cherry preserves.
How those glass jars glittered
when we turned on that one light bulb
hanging from the ceiling in the dark basement.

3/5/2014

Hunters and Trophies
[a later version]

Hemingway comes back from Africa
with trophies: rhinoceros heads,
hippo's heads, Cape buffalo heads,
and that of Francis Macomber

In Sri Lanka leopard pelts
on the walls, crossed elephant tusks
above the mantle, mounted crocodile's head
wild boar, sambhur deer, sloth bear.
Hidden away in a cupboard somewhere
the pelt of a gray langur, skin of a toque macaque.

In Deli in the maharajah's palace
the wall of tiger heads, their mouths open,
teeth white and sharp.

In Colorado at the Y camp
the head of Sampson, pet elk,
killed by the poacher.

In Washington, D. C., Diogenes
is still hunting for the honest man —
his lantern spilling pools of light
against the dark.

1/23/2017

2 Star Tortoise

Star tortoise ambles on his antediluvian legs,
his shell armored with bosses
decorated with yellow stars, prefers shade
in hot afternoons, eats grasses, fruit
and flowers. Courtship difficult.
Several hours of clashing against
the female's shell. He sees well,
but cannot hear wind play the palm's castanets,
waves drumming in from the sea,
the scream of the jackal.

1/19/2016

Traditional House in Sri Lanka

The sparrow, flighty and afraid,
Drab little hen, color of dust
Dares the interstices
Between wall and roof
where the gecko
slithers in an out, where hot air eases
up to join the tropic thermals.

She makes her nest
In Deloraine's chandelier
above the dining room table
She's the good luck bird.

1/19/2016

DIWALI
(Festival of Lights, Sri Lanka)

Tonight the neighbors cut ornate paper lanterns,
light candles inside them, hang them on trees
around their house. The jungle around us, dark,
a blacker blackness than I have ever seen.
Somewhere a monkey howls and then everything
is still except the lantern lights,
weaving bright patterns through thick leaves,
fleeting like so many small, sweet comforts.

3/15/2016

Terror
Hawksbill Sea Turtle

Like cinema stars, the Hawksbill,
blessed for beauty,
cursed for beauty
because there are those who kill
for its translucent

heart-sha carapace
ped
dark to golden brown
with brushstrokes
of orange, red;
plastrom
clear yell
ow.

Tractor tracks of the females
across the sand, 5 or 6 clutches,
50-200 soft ping-pong eggs;
60 days in the sun, hatchlings awake,
begin their slow scramble
toward the sea, past claws of waiting crabs, flocks
of gulls wheeling, screaming, diving.

All solitary swimmers, alone in shallow waters
alone with their beauty, their memories
of their night of terror and
ONE
in a 1,000 survives.

10/13/2016

Ancient Forms
Spirit Lake, Iowa

Cruising the lake this morning, the great blue heron
fishes, tips his beak, swallows, lifts his great wings, flaps off,

his pterodactyl head and neck leading him. Small waves
lick the shore, withdraw, lick again. Sugar white sand

here at the north end of the lake, twinned at the south
where one of the millipede feet of the mile-high glacier

halted after kicking up high moraines, east, west.
The millionaire down the way hired a yellow cat with a big claw

to make a flat beach and 70 red Macs to carry away the glacier's mistake.
No regard for 25 oaks, hidden lady slippers, Oglala pottery shards.

I sit on the porch, letting nature be, sipping my coffee,
comforted by the blue shadows writing genealogy on the shore.

I, too, evolutionary, once a bird, before that, a fish,
faint memory of fetal gills closing before my birth.

12/21/2016

Sailing Toward Paradise
Colombo, Sri Lanka

On his world-wide reading tour
when Mark Twain's ship
approached Colombo's harbor, the sailors
spread ground cinnamon on the decks.
Gullible tourists inhaled the scent
that promised paradise

Cinnamon Gardens,
now part of the overgrown city,
once a plantation of cinnamon trees
and scrub where meek creatures
rustled beneath the leaves.
There Deloraine's father hunted
the black napped hare
and the star tortoise browsed.
Now the domain of embassies, villas
of the rich, trees cut down,
hare long since in the stew pot;
star tortoise fled as fast
as his antediluvian legs could carry him
beneath the six bosses of his shell,
emblazoned with yellow stars.

In April and November
Tamil workers peeled the bark
in vertical strips, carefully,
so as not to kill the trees.
Delicate bark dried in curls, slid
together like giant brown cigars
called quills, although they wrote
only on air. Most sensitive noses in the country
sniff and the subtlest scents command the best
prices.

High above the tree tops, the masts,
a perfume wafting toward your ship,
wherever you have been,
wherever you are bound,
Paradise, always in the mind.

1/23/2017

Mothers

We love the sensational story:
baby-faced killer who murdered
and dismembered the swim suit model.
His mother weeps, tells reporters
what a sweet boy he was, although all the
evidence
says that's not true.

The old science fiction writer
sits in his wheel chair beside the pool
at the Otters' Swim Club in Colombo,
does not duck when the flying foxes sweep low
"They have such sweet faces," he says.

Thousands of them unfold, rise
out of Victoria Park every evening at sundown
eddying out above the palms.
Four-foot wing span
hairy red bodies
vampire teeth,
for eating mangoes, bananas, dates.

Nature fashions snakes, skunks, weasels,
the ugly and repugnant,
does not discriminate, allows the mutation,
experiments without moral judgments.
Females swoop and dive, searching
for the perfect nectar, ripest papaya,
and clinging to their backs,
those sweet, hairy fruit bat babies.

1/23/2017

The Science Fiction Writer Speaks of Bats
[a later version]

The old science fiction writer
sits in his wheel chair beside the pool
at the Otters Swim Club in Colombo, Sri Lanka,
does not duck when the flying foxes sweep low.
"They have such sweet faces," he says.

Thousands of them unwrap themselves, rise
out of Victoria Park every evening at sundown
eddying silently above the palms,
above small brown children
splashing in the wading pool.

Four-foot wing span, furry red bodies
vampire incisors.
Females swoop and dive, searching
for the perfect mango, ripest papaya,
and clinging to their backs,
those sweet, hairy, toothy fruit bat babies.

8/11/2017

Wedding Song

Packaged Wedding, Sri Lanka

12:02 and 20 seconds
Astrologer says, "most auspicious moment." ,
British couple enters the bow-built Poruwa arbor
on the beach, stepping with the right feet first.
(*Ring-neck parakeet whistles from his banana leaf.*)

12:05 and 13 seconds.
They greet each other, palms held together.
Palm fronds swish, whish, whish
La, la, la, lalala.

12:06
Groom is handed a tray of seven sheaves
of betel leaves, a coin placed in each.
(Tribe of lagurs in the jungle canopy far off chatter, bark, bark.)

12:08
Bride takes one at a time,
(Hotel guests returning from a swim stop and watch.)
drops it on the ground, repeats seven times
for the relatives on each side.
Wind from the bay wafts, swish, swish.
La,la,la,lalala.

12:12 and 23 seconds
Native stand-in for the uncle, ties the couples' little fingers together
(Best man from Nottingham smirks.)
with a red thread and pours water over them,
water and earth being the eternal verities.
(Groom thinks only fleetingly about soccer match on the telly now.)
Sea comes in lisp, lisp, lisp.
Uncle turns them around three times
(Bride tugs her strapless, slipped slightly dress.)
Second parakeet lands beside the first, tish, tish, tish.
Lalala

12:16 and 3 seconds
The whole world whispers, "Wish, wish, wish,"
hums "La, la, la."

12:18
They step out from the Poruwa.
Master of Ceremonies breaks a coconut,
and then the faux-Sri-Lankan part:
An elephant appears, caparisoned in pink satin
with ruffles, a pink apron for its trunk and pink ear muffs
over her great ears, which the bride and groom ride
around the compound to cheers of the wedding party,
hotel guests, bus load of tourists now disembarking.
Parakeets whisk away.

The astrologer disappears,
and they must guess the auspicious moments
during the rest of their lives.
The wedding, heavy with Hollywood,
groom already developing paunch, bride,
heavy make-up masking little wrinkles around her eyes,
something a little desperate, as if this were the last chance
to grasp something they don't have and don't know how to get,
something indefinable and distant
that will surely come after riding the elephant.

Swish, swish, lisp, lisp, tish, tish, wish, wish
la,la,la, lalala, lalala, lalala,
La.

1/23/2017

Blame

When cobra dances
Yes, yes
sways and undulates
Yes, yes
he mesmerizes.

Eve, it's impossible to resist
his hypnotic glances.
Yes, yes

How could God make such a mis-
calculation with this
creature? If he did.
Yes, yes

1/23/2017

Mirage

Old sheep dog, I'm surprised to see you
in the Temple of Ba'al in this desert oasis,
too hot in your curly grey-black fur, white vest,
hair over your round brown eyes,
resting in the shade on the steps
of the high altar where many abominations
and tortures were practiced,
panting because you're my old dog,
and dead two years.
I think you are cleansing and purifying
this bloody place with your goodness and
innocence.
With you, two Brits, elderly frail sticks.
They speak to me in soft angel voices,
leaning against the stones so I cannot see their
backs
where their wings are folded.

1/23/2017

The End of Diplomacy

In Aleppo, Syria, when the silly Chicago girl brought a mangy white kitten with yellow puss in its eyes to the American diplomat's reception, the kitten proceeded to scratch in one of the flower pots and shit. We who were watching were not responsible for the kitten, although some of the guests suggested it might be making a political statement. However, the kitten was embargoed. No one could trade with it, although trade was risky even if it had been legal because the kitten hadn't been vaccinated, surely had a dread disease, which we would all catch if we petted the scrawny, mewling creature. We did not want to die or offend the diplomat, a kind and intelligent man, whose job was to be a megaphone for policies made half a globe away. Of course none of us recognized that the globe had split and that we were all falling into the crevasses while the Bedouin servants brought around drinks and hors d'oeuvres. I don't know what happened to the kitten, but the girl joined the army, the diplomat moved to a more important post, and I came home with stories to tell that no one wanted to hear.

1/23/2017

Hunter
for Dick Hugo

The muddy furrows hug my shoes.
The earth loves me and will not let me go.
Here is the wet smell of winter coming,
fine panes of ice lighting the puddles,
delicate crackle. Corn tassels trail
in dirt; cattails fuzz slow in the sharp wind.
The muskrats have rounded their houses;
they are sleek and fat. The blackbirds flock;
their chirping flowers the frozen sky.
The hawk sails, glides the updrafts,
watches the slight weaving in the grass,
falls like granite. The rabbit screams
by the pale rock. The geese come
at sundown, crying toward the marsh,
carried down the bloody sky,
the marsh wrinkles red. Wind whistles
through white feathers. They float
the cold water, weightless as angels.
I keep one hand on the dog.
The gun is heavy. We turn back
toward where we thought was home.

1/23/2017

"The Attic which Is Desire"

She stands erect only in the center,
walks with head down; when she forgets,
a red rafter knocks against her skull.
Here are the crannies where the bat hangs,
leather wings in origami folds —
flies suddenly, silent as appetite.
Here is the dark corner where the snake skins
are nailed to the wall to cure.
She thinks she hears the naked snakes
return at night, rustle around the corners.
And here she has laid out the butternuts
to dry before removing their rough husks,
before cracking the hard shells
for the sweet, white meat.

1/23/2017

Old Tiger's Kittens Make Their Rounds

I see them curl up on porches, sharpen
their claws on tame trees, leap from fence to fence,
or watch me safely behind house curtains.
Here are Old Tiger's striped descendants,

enigmatic as he, each place I walk
around the neighborhood. I catch my breath
although he's dead long years, they stalk
or sashay down a lawn, dare fierce dog death,

take no guff. And sometimes they stop and pause,
look at me as if they have a racial
memory, feel in their hearts old love's laws,
in their throats hear his purring, musical

from the past. They make their secret circuits
each day as if the world depends on it.

1/23/2017

Racial Memory, East/West
"Changing Tree at the Oji Shrine on New Year's Eve" woodcut by Hiroshige

On New Year's Eve naked foxes from eight
Kanto provinces gather at the Changing Tree.

Sleek foxes' furless flesh tones, demure,
downcast eyes. A flutter of light above each face.

There they will don white weskits, silky red fur robes,
foxes always proper by their own standards,

these suitable for visiting the Oji Shrine.
They breathe out tongues of fire, delicate as flowers.

Stars salt the sky. Under the hackberry tree
by an old pine, will-o' the-wisps, St. Elmo's fire.

Farmers count the number of flickers
and know their fields' forthcoming yields.

Fox cousins in Madison County, Wisconsin,
gather in the same way, the old shrines lost to memory.

They only know there is a ritual, something important,
something ancient and proper, a necessary dance for the new year.

1/23/2017

Foxfire [Another version]
Changing Tree on New Year's Eve

On New Year's Eve foxes from eight
Kanto provinces gather at the Changing Tree.

Sleek foxes' flesh tones, furless. Demure,
downcast eyes. A flicker of fire dances above each face.

There they put on white weskits, silky red fur robes,
foxes always proper by their own lights,

these suitable for visiting the Oji Shrine
where they receive their orders

for the coming year. Farmers say
they count the number of flickers

and know their fields' forthcoming yields.
Under the hackberry tree, backed by an old pine,

phosphorescence, will-o' the-wisp,
St. Elmo's fire, all sly as foxes

appearing, disappearing for no reason,
except mystery and beauty.

The foxes breathe flames delicate as flowers,
and stars salt the sky.

Price

after a woodcut by Hiroshige

One crane wades in the pond, his beak open,
one dives from the top of the frame.

You can almost hear the whish of wind
through his iridescent white feathers.

The emperor's decree protects these ponds:
no firecrackers, loud noises, especially, no dogs.

They must have tranquility, but it is difficult
to imagine why. When they speak in crane language

they scream, cuss, talk dirty, their voices rough,
raucous, the vocabulary of street hoodlums.

Their appetites murderous for small frogs
and silver fish that unsuspectingly swim

near their red toes. Their feathers exquisite,
red crowns, black masks under golden eyes.

They pose in elegant positions. They're so lovely
that later the Shogun will stage a hunt.

Seventy or eighty of his men with hawks
will capture two or three, tie them

to bamboo poles, and take them to Kyoto
where beauty will extract its price from the beautiful:

The palace cook will transform them
into the emperor's tranquility soup.

1/23/2017

Waiting Room

Potted bamboo with long, elliptical leaves, jointed stems,
lacquer screen with two cranes,
their feathers white and a color reminiscent of blue,
tail feathers bluish-brown, and pine branches,
each needle in white against the black background,
one branch viewed from the end like star bursts.

The cranes wade in a black stream, gravel
and rocks, six faintly green, five-petaled flowers
on the left bank, all stylized and serene, even though
the right crane, holding its lovely neck upright
has opened his stiletto beak to cry a hoarse cry.

The other is watching something at its toes,
tense with hunger, ready to stab its dinner,
yet still beautiful and innocent
as the dangerous mushrooms,
pale white whorled with pink that burgeon
beside the stones at the lower left,
the sight line diagonal,
and the anxiety palpable in the waiting room.

The old man who sits next to me asks
if I'm writing a letter. I nod agreement —
A poem is a letter, as Emily told us.
He says, "I can't write anymore. Too nervous."
I recognize Parkinson's. "I'm eighty-five," he chuckles,
"outlived three doctors who told me I was going to die.
They're giving me a purple heart for Normandy
next Thursday. I got along all this time without it."

The bamboo does not sway in the gentle murmur
from the air conditioner. The cranes hold their positions
perpetually. Those who aren't going to die
and those who are, come and go.
Still, it's the same thing, isn't it?
Disease and Recovery — the names of the cranes!

1/23/2017

Starflowers

I stand among violets and star flowers,
the first dandelions of spring,
caught in webs of new green grass.
Two scarlet tanagers courting:
she flies a few branches away.
He follows, she flits again, turns
to look at him. Red-wing blackbird
trills from his perch on cattail stem
losing its stuffing. Above me,
a wood duck nesting box
from which I hear small verbs.

I have known transcendence before,
once in Baltimore on the quay
watching the fine gilt-edged
waves coming in at sunset.
My earring fell down the neck
of my dress, cold as a tear,
and you retrieved it,
and once in the garden at Giverny
eating peaches, drinking wine.

This spring day brims with splendor,
Lies and truth. Lies are as good as they last,
but truth has golden dandelion eyes.

1/23/2017

I Think of Virgil's Farmer

I think of Virgil's farmer; he counts his sheep,
pulls the burrs from their wool;
his dog, black as a mulberry, stands beside him,
tail wags, tongue hangs out. I watch him lug a
rock
on the steep terrace, shove it into a wall;
prune back grapevines for new growth,
drive the plowshare into the recalcitrant earth.

He comes home at sundown, washes under the
plane tree
by the door, sits down to brown bread and cheese,
a comb of homey. This man doesn't care
whether words are felicitous — the pigeon his
gossip,
the crow his depravity, the hawk his eloquence.

At Bergma where Mark Antony stole the library
and shipped it to Cleopatra, a farmer makes hay
by the ruins of Hadrian's Gate, a scythe in hand.
Grass and flowers fall beside the broken columns.
Books mold, paper crumbles, the stolen library
burns at Alexandria; poetry goes up in smoke,
science flakes in the ashes.
Who wastes a life on words should know better.
Rocks remain. Burrs keep growing.

1/23/2017

Weimaraners

When I consider true dancers, masters of
movement,
I think of you, Sheba, Boomer, Baby,
grey-violet Weimaraners, your pale blue eyes
glowing fluorescent pink in the dark.
You are never still, always moving,
always alert for the scent of something wild,
for a game of tag, or a quick run
across the lawn, a playful nip at each other.
I watch your long lopes, almost like flying,
your easy turns as if your spines
were double jointed. Your feet sure,
the black webs between your toes hidden,
you race to the pond and the foolish mallard
quacks, scrambles across the top of the water
to take off while you swim, steady,
your sights targeted on him. He will get away
and you'll swim back, serene
now that you have shown me where the game is,
oblivious of hunting season and its rules.
I remember you last fall
with blood on your muzzles, proudly
laying the ducks at my feet. I wished then
that I were Winnebago or Sioux so I could pray
thanks
to the spirit of the ducks for feeding me,
assuaging the killing. I, who can stumble
on air, stumble on moral qualms, worry
about my love of the hunt, the bagged bird,
a trophy of something both exalted and depraved,
but you dance about each other,
vying for an invisible place,
some advantageous spot that keeps shifting,
demonstrating one of the forms of grace.

1/23/2017

Two Ways of Looking at Three Weimaraners

I

I think they're carriers —
migrating souls temporarily
ride in their sly bodies.
Look! Their spotlight eyes leak
vacillating spirits.

II

When I see them asleep,
curled all together, I know
it isn't three, but one: Cerberus
who ought to be guarding the gates of hell.
He knows I know
he is wandering around on earth
carrying his burden with him,
like all of us.

1/23/2017

Two Who Need Each Other

In Petra's village a woman in black
buys hay, stuffs it into
a pearlescent plastic bag,
lugs it up the steep hill's zigzag path,
last rays of sun flashing from it.

At the top a horse, silhouetted
against the dusky sky,
prances on the ridge.

You are the woman
carrying the burdens of the day,
and he is the beautiful creature
who will eat and canter away.
It has always been like that.

1/23/2017

Walking the Dog beside the Hudson

Walking the dog past Greek Salad Place
where someone once set out a party left-over,
which Diamond scarfed down before I could
stop her, past Bagel Hill where she gobbled two,
fallen from the garbage truck,
and Dog Bite Corner where the chow
leaped out, sunk its teeth into her thigh,.
past the stone mansion of the dead squirrel,
wouldn't open her iron jaw
until I bribed her with a doggie treat.

Then the North Shore Train rushes past
along the Hudson, the Tappen Zee bridge
in the distance, ice beginning to grow
its jagged teeth along the shore,
and I think of the Half Moon, floating
past the Palisades, Henry Hudson ebullient —
The Northwest Passage surely ahead of him
come spring, and for the winter, plenty
of game on the easy East bank where I stand,
and when the sailors lower a basket,
fish leap into it.

Victory, a knighthood, the Queen herself
coming aboard, all the cinnamon, cardamom,
pepper of the Indies, the rubies, pearls, sapphires,
silks and ivories, spilling into England — all of this
coming to fruition as soon as the river thaws.

But Diamond tugs at the leash,
River opens its mouth to the tides
babbles, but tells no real secrets.
Water is like that.

1/23/2017

Fishing the Cedar River

Line jerks, reel spins, and exhilarated,
he's confident his ten-year-old skill can play it.
Half an hour later, his arms shaking,
one of the old Czech fishermen who dangle
their lines over the bridge every day
helps him haul the old carp over the railing.
Silver scales glitter in the sun, gills pulse,
and he sees they're like lace,
sees the fish is desperate. He almost cries,
but the old guy is congratulating him.
Too heavy to carry, he drags
his river beast along the side walk five blocks,
pulls it across the bank's marble floor,
to his father's office. Tellers titter,
secretaries look askance at the carp's accusing
yellow eye.
They don't know he's Izaak Walton, Nick Adams,
the Old Man and the Sea. His father stands up
behind his polished oak desk
and says, "Man, that's some fish!"

2/13/2017

Wings
Yala Reserve, Sri Lanka

Official green Jeep drives the jungle paths,
I survey every overhanging branch
for a leopard looped lazily across it,
but the leopards are lolling elsewhere.
Two Ivory-billed Toucans hunch on high, dead branches,
little Bee-Eaters, iridescent in blue, green, and yellow feathers,
flit about. No destinations, no schedules for their tiny brains,
Sri Lanka Junglefowl flaunts his parti-colored feathers.
Suddenly a Peacock struts out of the tangled green brush,
the demeanor of nobility. Places himself in front of the Jeep.
Spreads his iridescent tail, rattles his eye-catching fronds,
and dances his stately dance.

Now at every turn of the path
the Jeep shines more exotic,
the leopard, who did not appear,
breaks out in finer black rosettes,
all the birds flaunt their finery,
and I, trapped in this ordinary skin,
ache for glamour, fur, flamboyant feathers.

3/13/2017

The Bear
after al-Jahiz

According to the Bedouin:
Bear is an animal unknown
Not of any kind or kin ever grown
out of the desert's sandy sequins
(probably mythical like the tintin).
The family's not from our neighborhood
(and thus, cannot be any good).

According to Galien from Pergama
(a far-off place of little drama)
a physician to Roman emperors,
(so what in the world could he know?)
"Bear cubs are born rolled up
into a ball their weak limbs tucked
inside. She inspects them for mites and lice
grooming them, licking smooth and nice —
She carries them until their little limbs
grow strong and sturdy* to walk, climb, swim."

According to artist, D'Ahmed Hajeri
who paints the cubs on a picnic
lolling on a carpet from Hariz, clearly
happy and healthy, not lousy or sick.

According to the poet, al-Jahiz
a happy family, this is, certainly is.
The she-bear climbs the walnut tree
picks and shells the nuts, she
throws many down to the waiting young
who stare up. Note: hanging-out tongues.
She stashes nuts in baskets — see the limb,
not in fracture,
but arches beneath her weight across Hajeri's picture.

3/13/2017

Note
sturdy: The typescript reads "study."

The Elephant

Sahl ibn Harun is amazed
at the elephant's gaze.
He quotes
and notes:
"When I contemplate the elephant's eyes
full of heavy meaning, I'm galvanized
and must compare him to the condition
of our finest human erudition."

I say that old ibn Harun
is full of Persian shit. If I could scare him
up an elephant, I'd prove, I'd show him
elephant's best: he looks like an old king
full of compassion, and most high learning,
but I'd also display a truthful thing
or two of how easily elephant's entrapped
by a ruse that's fake as benevolent rat:

If you drop a walnut on any floor,
elephant tries to pick it up and more,
but his great trunk's breath blows
it away — trunk's also nose!
He keeps blowing it ineffectively
will keep trying into infinity.

Now that's Dumb beyond Dumb,
distinguished librarian, ibn Harun
— take your overblown Persian
verse forms away,
with all your essays
on avarice that you obviously know well
to admire so greatly. Let translations tell
the story and song in the Arabic tongue,
colloquially sung.

Struthers's note
In the 9th century at the House of Wisdom there was a literary dispute over whether it was better to use Persian poetic forms which were formalized, artificial forms, *bukl,* or Arabic forms, *bayan,* more akin to normal Arabic speech. The Persian forms were advocated by Sahl ibn Harun; the Arabic forms by al-Jahiz.

3/13/2017

Swallowing the Toothpick
The Egyptian Plover picks the teeth of the crocodile
al-Jahiz

blame al-Jahiz, blame Herodotus
who originated the (mis)information
Aristotle and Pliny, too, got on the bus
repeated it, accepting scientific inflation
so old al-Jahiz, the google eyed
who read the Greeks did not doubt
took the famous writers for his guide.
Heresy to question them, or flout
their evidence. So he reports in sober truth
how old croc hinges opens his great jaws
and yawns, exposing every sharpened tooth
and dreams of tasty plover eaten raw
(any dentist near would love "the open wide".)
Between the rows of sharpened razor molars
Egyptian Plover sees a meal and hops inside
he dares to walk around, a feathered stroller,
inspecting croc's unflossed bicuspids
and pecks between for those delicious bits.
Snap! The moral: appetite cannot be trusted
for safety, and don't believe in all that's writ.

3/13/2017

Swallowing the Toothpick
al-Jahiz on the Crocodile

In Egypt the ferocious crocodile
the king of banks and waters of the Nile
crawls out to taste the sun with open jaws.
The plover sees free meals and doesn't pause,
walks inside, pecks bits between the molars,
cleans croc's teeth. No gratitude to plover —
croc doesn't hesitate
to shut the buffet's gate.
It's Snap! and plover can't assert
his usefulness now he's dessert.

8/11/2017

The Ostrich
according to al-Jariz

the sailors at Basra say that the ostrich
She dines on boulders, picks gravel for her crop
Her appetite, unable to resist
The copper, heavy iron cooking pots
she doesn't care
the fire's hot, she eats the glowing embers
but this does not cause damage to her tender
derriere.

3/13/2017

The Gourmet

The astonishing ostrich
eats rocks, gravel and boulders
relishes this tasty sandwich.
Gastronomical, she'll soldier
on through fantastical menus,
eat everything: iron and brass
cooking pots, and genu-
inly relishes a blazing fire,* her ass
not burned going through her. No hair
gets scorched on her marvelous derriere.

8/11/2017

Note
blazing: the original reads "bazing."

Cat Nip

The cuddly pet of ladies, singing girls
the cat gets cuddled, and carried about,
even around their necks like precious pearls,
even pampered and kissed upon the mouth!

The effortless oiled gears in cat's shoulders
wheel the padded steps of velvet paws.
Unwanted dog approach: cat bares his bold
talons and razor teeth, declares a war.

Becomes a tiger and unfolds his pleats
of velvet fur, and leaps, flying attack.
The dog turns tail, and yelps and tries to flee
but can't dislodge the cat upon his back.

3/13/2017

Cat Nip

Cat's silken gears propel shoulders, hips
as smooth as oil; his velvet fur rip-
ples, across his body as he slips
into the laps of singing girls who kiss
his mouth. He purrs against their petal lips.

8/11/2017

Supper at Latakia

I could smell the inheritance of honey
as the wax melted and the feathers fell,
drifted like snow flakes. I beat the ribs
strapped to my arms as fast as I could,
but I stumbled on winds, turned, tumbled,
catapulted down as far as I had gone up —
the green caverns of the sea as commodious
as the blue ones of the sky.
There the curious fish I fed, fed the fish
that fed the fish on your plate.
You sit on the terrace under the grape arbor,
the grapes beginning to blush with color,
and pause, fork uplifted, remembering something.
The café cats complain softly,
rub against your leg, beg
for a taste of my bones.

3/29/2017

Treading the Flowers
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Rose red, wine red, sunset red, bloody moon red,
heat from the petals of coals arises.
These are not the petals
of deep red frangipani, but blossoms of blood
from more than 20,000 elephants
slaughtered for sport by the British,
who hung the great tusks, finished with silver
end brackets above their mantels,
not the rosettes of red from the leopards
shot for their pelts for the love of the hunt.

Two small men, sarongs tucked up, pray
at the goddess' shine,
step out bare-footed on the rose-glowing charcoal,
treading the flowers,
then on the cool cement floor, turn
and walk back again.

The goddess protects their audacious feet,
but she didn't lift a finger against
the tsunami, or against the politicians
who disappeared their opponents,
tossed their bodies from planes,
to roll in Indian Ocean.

Her tiny arms did not
stop the war that killed 80,000,
the trapped Tamils at Jaffna, old women, old men,
the orphanage children stacked in bunks to the ceiling.
When the shells exploded, they ran through the splintered doors
into machine gun fire spraying like fountains run amok,
and died in the mud
whimpering like animals.

Goddess of limited powers, Goddess of blind eyes,
Goddess of courage-for-no-good-use,
What has died? and what can be saved?
where the fires of justice? the petals of compassion?

The frangipani grows again; palms sprout
small shoots on the killing shore. This is not enough.
There is no enough that's enough.

5/3/2017

Night Coming On
for Eudora Seyfer, 1925-2009

Dusk in the wooded ravine
behind her house, and we watch
the dusky wild turkeys gather,
begin to try their one daily flight
into the trees for safety.
Clumsy, they miss the lowest branches,
fall, try again, finally alight,
dark feathery bundles huddle beside the dark.
She does not know she has cancer;
we do not know that we will never stand here again
with her, watching night coming on,
the turkeys ascending as high as they can.

8/11/2017

Horse Sense

This horse is no fool
"There's a face in my drinking pool,
An enemy glares up at me
His look is much unfriendly.
I strike the image with my hoof;
but rippling back at me, three. Proof
there's a herd behind them. I glance,
and strike again. The menace
gets destroyed in my water."
Time for horse laughter, horse laughter.

8/11/2017

Fast Cats

Sleek and beautiful, fast, the jaguar cat
would be jealous of your speed, your cat-
like grace; slide, glide, around buoy, tack
past judges' boats where they record stats.
Lake's wake washes away your cat tracks,
this bright regatta of Hobie Cats.

8/11/2017

Stakeout

When the cougar poem does not arrive,
put out some bait: the dirtiest lie you ever told,
drunk in Paris, the thing you stole,
your heart's unfaithfulness.

Patience,
the waiting game, a shiver
of premonition, a parting
of the dead grasses, a shadow
on a limb overhead. Yes, Yes,
and the leap that breaks the neck
and gnaws the heart.

8/11/2017

Near The Turkish Border

No moon. No lights. Shepherd driving his sheep
on the shoulder. Their black faces,
black legs, lost in the dark. Only their white bodies
drifting like clouds of ghosts,
like the souls of all the ancient dead,
along the road to Antioch and Iskandaroon.

8/11/2017

Enchanted
when poetry was magic, the Irish Bards

When Seanchan Torpet wound up, cursed
the rats with his satiric verse,
they fell dead from the thatch, ten first
and then ten more, caught and immersed
with no escape, trapped in the purse
of poetry — black magic bursts
of malice, dangers, but the worst:
he also trapped my heart with mirth,
ah, love, that was the very worst.

1/30/2018

Crumbs for the Sparrow
Sri Lanka

Too bare-brained* to understand we're poor
and plain, that the world despises us,
for far too many of our kind,
but we exist* cheerful and oblivious.
We bathe in dust, drink from dirty puddles,
deemed unworthy, neglected, cursed all over the world,
eating crumbs from the cruel street's table.

God must have made us last, giving us
Quaker garb while other birds fuss
over royal plumage, colored feathers, crowns, cockades.
We're insignificant, overlooked,
ubiquitous, plain, without a lyric song, only squeeks,
chirps, common sounds any bird can make,
not even the incongruous surprise
of the whistling swan's clown claxon!
No strut, no aerial acrobatics, no size or weight,
no sharpened beaks or talons.

But in Sri Lanka we dare
to hop through interstices
made to ease the hot air out
at ceiling height from human houses.
We bravely slip inside,
build nests on chandeliers.
Then we're noticed,
blessed,
named the good luck bird!

4/9/2018

Notes
bare-brained: perhaps intended "hair-brained."
exists: the original reads "exits." In a 2013 text, this was "chirps."

Unawatuna

shaved short beach
coral reef gone
new girl sells batik
new kid with ice chest of soda
new hotels, bigger, pricier,
confused sea turtles, Green and Ridley, can't find
where to lay their rubber-shelled eggs.

Sea
comes in softly, sweetly,
pretends it can't remember anything.

4/9/2018

Shore Birds

Swallows perch on the five wires overhead,
whole notes on the staff,
fat with all the sand flies they ingested
while swooping in great loops,
beaks open through the summer air,
so stuffed they can scarcely sit upright.

Finches buzz the plastic owl tied to the dock
to frighten the gulls.
Sandpipers march the beach on matchstick legs,
great heron, flying grey arrow, disappears in the
shadows
by the overhanging willows.
Kingfisher teaches fledglings to fly
with great twittering, chittering admonitions
and encouragements, and the frowsy young
twitter back — reluctance, fear.

My summer TV show,
plot-less, but zinging with action.

4/25/2018

Shore Birds [another version]

Swallows sit on the wires, a hundred or more,
fat with all the sand flies they ingested,
while swooping in great loops
through the summer air, their beaks open.
Now they're sated, so stuffed
they can scarcely hold themselves upright.

Finches buzz the plastic owl tied to the dock
to frighten the sea gulls.

Sandpiper marches the beach on his matchstick
legs,
great heron, flying grey arrow, disappears in the
shadows
by the overhanging willows.
Today the kingfisher taught fledglings to fly
with great twittering, chittering admonitions
and encouragements, and the frowsy young
twittered back with reluctance, fear

It is late, my eyes hurt
and you haven't written me a letter.

Hunting

I am hunting the Yeti
where blizzards swirl, sleet
salts my face, fur on my parka freezes
from my breath. The creature who stalks
the mountain drifts wraps himself
in a cloak of snow,
wears a helmet of ice,
escapes through the door
of whiteness again,
only his paw print reminder.

I am hunting for Sasquatch,
Chief Red Arrow warns,
“Maybe 5000 of them hiding
in forests wilder than anyone knows.”
Chief says, "Do not shoot my brother,
a shadow, a companion,
a rescuer in time of trouble.”

I am hunting for Nessie,
gazing into dark waters
colored by furze,
in the fjord gouged by a glacier,
cold wind shudders off the ice.
She will not come to the duck calls
or the whistles made for wild geese.
or show herself in the lens of cameras.
She hides herself from sonar, so I am singing,
singing
using for bait a love ballad
from the old days, for all songs are longing,
all poems are longing
all poets are hunters.

5/7/2018

Sparrow

We flutter down
to the street for crumbs from the table
where we are unworthy to eat,
chirp cheerfully, even in the blast,
sustained by innocence and knowing
that long ago someone named us
precious and cared if one of us,
Even the smallest,
Even the dirtiest,
Fell.

5/24/2018

Swine Whine
Sounder* Sows complain

The Wild Boar boars aren't stay-at-home
responsible. They're not humble
husbands, They take their way with sows
leave us next day. They roam, grumble

in distant wallows. We females birth
the babies, suckle, divvy up
the orphans so they'll live. The boars
won't suffer anything to interrupt

their growls, aggressive leisure,
while we raid garbage bins, stealers,
beggars from travelers, rooters,
scavengers for our Squealers.

6/5/2018

Note
Sounder: name of collective group of sows with their young, called Squealers.

Sounder [another version]
Wild Boar Sows complain

The Wild Boar boars aren't stay-at-homes,
responsible. They're not humble
husbands. They take their way with sows
and leave next day. They roam, grumble

in distant wallows while females birth
the babies, suckle, divvy up
the orphans so they'll live. The boars
won't suffer anything to interrupt

their growly selfish leisure
We tip the garbage tins, stealers,
and beggars from travelers, rooters,
scavengers for our Squealers.

Pearls of Mannar
Sri Lanka, 1912

Leonard Wolfe, colonial administrator,
in Ceylon
supervised pearl season:
Indian divers,
Arabs in their dhows.

Oysters
carried in from the boats every night in great baskets,
first two for the British, every third for ships' captain,

spilled on the tropical beach so
pearl grey sea creatures died,
Rotting
locked shell doors opened easily.

Swarms,
thick veils of flies and mosquitos
hot blanket of stench wraps all the island.

Shells' tiny irritants,
nacreous,
lovely white, pearl grey,
lay gently on the swan-like necks
of royal British women
unaware that they carry
all those stinking piles
of silent sea creatures.

6/18/2018

Ghost Cattle
Christmas Eve

Chill, even the candle flames shiver
in the Old Dutch Church, stone-built
in 1648 at Sleepy Hollow.
Old lessons lisp in the shadows.
Choir loft songs, sweeter than incense.

I remember Colombo, Sri Lanka,
Dutch Church, grey stone like this one,
cow who browsed the grass in the church yard
on Galle Road. And in Delhi, dear Gandhi,
who could not imagine anyone eating a gentle
cow.
He did not know the bull that charged Uncle Ernie,
left him crippled for life, or the white-faced
Western
who lowered her bony head and hurled herself
toward me when I was a girl on the farm.

Tonight Washington Irving's cows,
gone 350 years, nuzzle the grass
between tombstones.
At midnight they, the Colombo cow,
sweet Indian cattle, fierce Westerns,
and those from the far away stable
in Bethlehem of Judea, will lift their heads
to the music, waiting meekly
for the second coming.

8/15/2018

Only the Buddha Has Divine Protection
Naga Raksha mask

Indian Cobra flared his hood for an umbrella
to protect the Buddha from rain as he was about to
enter Nirvana,
appears again and again on ceremonial masks:

Naga raksha:
(ENORMOUS TEETH),
bloody mouth
reptiles wriggle out its ears, nostrils,
a coiffure of writhing cobras.

On this island of oppression, revolution,
bombings, land mines, disappearances,
{Government shells the orphanage at Jaffna}
[Tigers conscript child soldiers]
mongoose, wild boar, and cobra are the nicer
creatures,

and none of these wear masks.

8/15/2018

al-Jahiz Learns to Read
9th century Arabian poet
an abecedarian

Apes from Surinam, crocodiles from Egypt,
Basra's port teaming. World's cargoes unloading
at the wharves:
Chinese tea, silk, their new invention — paper,
sailor's stories, dragons, devils, monsters,
fishermen eaten whole, swallowed by the *tin-tin*
snake,
fish that dance atop the waves, islands exploding,
marvels.
Gap-mouthed, the scruffy kid haunts the wharves,
listens,
hawks silver fish from his father's boat, wonders:
Islands exploding, jins with electric eyes.
Of course everyone believes.

Keeping to the carpet's fringe, at mosque, he
listens to the learned in their theories,
disputations,
men who debate — translate from the Greeks,
mathematics,
numbers, and their magic, the science of the stars,
opening his mind to Aristotle, Herodotus,
Pliny. He is a sponge, taking it all in,
qualifying, quantifying, storing it in his head until —
reading! The mosque thinkers teach him to read,
languages.
Suddenly the port of Basra becomes Port of
Knowledge.
Tide, fish, stories, now his goggle eyes
eviscerate ideas inside facts, tools to
verify, share knowledge across seas, languages,
time, like,
within the oyster from Ceylon, the pearl,
excise the big fish, small fish in its belly.
Yesterday preserved in writing, opened by the
knife of reading,
Zenith of delight! Oh Reading! O Reading!

8/15/2018

Cleaning the Ark
after al-Jiraz

The trouble in the Ark was mice.
The women, angry, said,
“We won’t be nice
anywhere and not in bed
unless you will exterminate
them, all but two. We mean it."

So Noah told God and right off the bat
God told Elephant to sneeze two cats,
female from the right nostril,
male from the left.
(Imagine that birth canal — how Awful!)

Cats caught mice and ate their fill,
grew strong and randy. As cats will,
reproduced faster than the rabbits.
Their stinky defecation habits
befouled the ark. Caused a stink.
the women on the very brink
of revolution: "Fix this nasty problem;
or our next strike will be awful awesome!"

So Noah told God, who saw the jig
was up unless he acted. He said, "Pigs.
Elephant, RIGHT NOW, sneeze two pigs,
female from the right nostril,
male from the left nostril.”
(Elephant’s trunk — what an expedient nozzle!)

Pigs not particular about their eats.
Shit’s all the same to them for meat.
Now God’s tired of drunk and feck-
less Noah. Before he comes to wreck
God stops the rain.
Sworn by every witness:
It’s elephant who enables.
Ark, at last, is clean and shitless.

Here now, this is the fable
and here, good friends, is the fabulous!

8/15/2018

The Court House Rats Bet
against Judge Stone-Face
after al-Jihaz

He was the high and mighty mucky-muck
of indiscernible, no expression. .
We hangers-on watched, bet his luck
would turn, but no confession

moved him. We had almost given up.
Till horse fly lit on his proboscis
and walked about, then deigned to sup
the corner of his eye. Obnoxious,

but great Stone-Face would give no ground,
no gesture and no recognition.
We waited for a natural respond.
He couldn’t hold out; capitulation

was assured, for surely he’d knuckle
under this attack, become like us,
mere mortals, so we dared a chuckle.
He flicked his lashes — was it enough?

to collect from his supporters?
Oh, no, they’d not pay up, not sure
they saw a flick. So out of order.
It had to be an obvious gesture.

The fly, impervious, bit and bit,
till our village famous icon
blew — his hands flew up and hit and hit.
We won, but we were oh, so wrong.

Our fallen pooh-bah judge admitted
“I see that I was vain and worse.
Oh, I’m feeble now, committed
to being humble, from henceforth.

(However, he cautions.)
The fly did not win; he’s craven.
Allah says, ‘The fly’s more obstinate
than beetle, prouder than the raven.
If anyone celebrates something not great,
(He convicts us all within one motion.)
that one will surely be condemned.’ It’s written.”

Thus all us winners were also bitten.

8/15/2018

Critics and Onagers

al-Jihaz, scholar and poet understands metaphor,
names the critics "so-called readers,"
recognizes them as disguised onagers,
wild donkeys, too stupid to be tamed
by reason and research,
their skin twitching at the least midge of a mistake,
at any broken-wing phrase.
A sloppy *ijam*
must be egregious error.
It can't be mistake,
a blot for the dot, made by the copyist?
No, it has to be a louse from the beard of the
author.

8/15/2018

Roseate Tern
No towns, No People

Dresses to the nines or even tens
for breeding season, depends

on black cap, pale grey underparts
of rosy tinge, attractive to female hearts.

Black beak, long white tail with streamers,
plunge diver once he sees the glimmer

of small fishes in the wave. Watches upwellings,
rip tides. Lives far away from human dwellings

on coastal islets where he feeds his young
sardines
anchovies. Later dwarf herring cuisine.

He minds his own business, keeps with his flock
The sun and tide his only clock.

10/25/2018

Faithful

Some Tibetans believe that monks
who haven't meditated properly
become dogs in the next life.
I once had an old monk of a dog
who lay on the couch all day and meditated
He had a sweet disposition,
although he barked at squirrels —
I think that was his mantra.
When he died, I have a hope
he ascended into heaven
where the angels blessed him,
where he still guards me from that great distance.

11/27/2018

Faithful
[Another version]

Tibetans believe that monks
who haven't meditated properly
become dogs in the next life.
I once had an old monk of a dog
who lay on the couch all day and meditated.
He had a sweet disposition,
although he barked at squirrels.
I think that was his mantra.
When he died, I'm certain
he ascended into heaven
where the angels blessed him
for his indifference to the follies
of this world, and sometimes I feel
his benevolent eyes still guarding me.

Retreat
Moose at Grand Lake Trail Head

Past parking lot, past sluice,
groves of fir and blue spruce
there stood madam, the moose,
accompanied by moose papoose,
no, it was two, twins, deuce,
all the same shade, dark puce.
She seemed bent on abuse;
She'd brook no excuse.
My face turned chartreuse,
as I turned on the juice
for a rapid vamoose.

1/10/2019

Gold on Gold

Small leaf linden finches
flit finally, golden as the leaves
left after first frost fall.

1/23/2019

Part 3

From typescripts in the Ann Struthers Papers

The Actress at the Outdoor Theater

"Shut up," I said to the crow,
"Don't shit on the balcony.
You will spoil all the halcyon.
How can Juliet lean on the railing,
lean on the railing as the moon is paling
if you have befouled it, you craven
black creature, you inferior raven?
Your impudent caw is harsh and obscene,
your feathers crawling with lice, unclean
as the puddles you drink from. How could
the drama proceed from sweet love to death's
blood
unless impetuous Romeo climbs up the palings?
It's murder I'm doing if you shit on the railings!"

After the Storm

Pigeons step daintily
their backs iridescent
buff and pink
in the pale sun,
their delicate toes, pale red.
Lost clouds scud overhead,
jet bead eyes do not
notice, the bright yellow beaks
inspect luminous gravel,
rain-washed, grading
flawed pearls.

All Hallows Eve

When the coyote bays to the hills,
do the horses, moored in their slips,
stir, remember, shake their shaggy manes,
for the days before wagons, harness and whips?

When the horned owl clucks to her young
drifting over stones polished with moon-steel,
does the canary bow its feathered head
under the dark hood, yield and kneel?

What lies dormant in the blood?
in the brain — waiting talon, hungry fang?
And you, asleep in our white bed,
turn and mumble in a runic tongue.

All the Sacred Creatures*

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Jeanette's flat, in a Muslim district,
where the old canine shibboleths hang over
the roofs, kids forbidden to pet the two sorry
bitches
she has taken in, fed and made fat enough
to feed their litters. Kids can't hold
the wriggling puppies who fall over each other,
yap and whine, nip each others' ears.
Strict mothers can't understand why
a westerner loves dogs, although
the local religious Buddhists and Hindus
won't kill anything — even flies, lice, mosquitoes
that used to bring malaria, but now only dengue
fever
for which there is no cure.

In the Muslim district where Jeanette
took in two sorry bitches, fed them
and made them fat enough to nurse
their litters of wriggling puppies,
the kids can't pet them, can't touch.
Old shibboleths hang over the roofs,
sprout from the small patch
of grass where the puppies
wriggle, fall over each other, yap
and whine, nip each others' ears.
Strict fathers despise westerners
for their love of dogs, but accustomed
to the local religious Buddhists and Hindus
who won't kill anything — even flies, lice,
mosquitoes
that used to carry malaria, but now only dengue
fever
for which there is no cure.

Note
*Both stanzas appear on the same page of a submission to a journal, as if they make up one poem, but probably they are two versions of the same poem.

Autumn Music
wasp and cicada

> ".. .tuneful Cicada is sitting on her tree
> .. .pours forth from under her wing her
> shrill song." Hesiod

Killer Wasp digs tunnel burial chamber
like that prepared for Queen Shub-ad of Ur.
Wears Tiffany-netted rusty tinted wings,
compound eyes, and ocelli
proper triangle in the forehead.

Cicada, varnished cutaneous wings, hides
between bark's camouflage, patient on Greek
harps
as Tithonus, shrunk and shrunk.
Vibrating underside tymbals
calls in the dog days of summer,
yeasty wine-dark fall.

Wasp strikes, stings, paralyzes
flies cicada to the burial chamber like the queen's,
who had to die after the death of the husband,
her maids with her, her little harp,
chamber door stuffed with earth, covered over.

Larvae fed on the living body,
later, years later, emerge into daylight.
Ur's Queen: dust and nothing left
but gold bracelets, her royal golden comb.

Sometime in November
just as the sun fades in the rose-sweet west,
you might hear a faint sound —
someone plucking
a curl of cloud or harp string,
a mistake, a mythic queen, or it might be
the song of the last summer cicada.

Barn Cats

Father named the barn cats
for radio news commentators:
H. V. Kaltenborn, Lowell Thomas,
Gabriel Heatter. When Edward R. Murrow
had kittens Father refused to change the name.
"Miracles happen," he told us,
his eyes twinkling.
Later when we four girls
began to have boyfriends,
he named the cats for them.
Larry Zimmerman, Robert Duane Deppeldorf,
Skinny Hassenphefer. He'd call
their names loudly while we nearly died
of embarrassment. And he kept renaming them
as the boys changed. Kenny Romaine Roscoe,
he'd sing out, and who could think
romantic thoughts about any boy
when every time you saw him,
you heard your father and those
mewling, musty cats?

Barn Cats [another version]

Father said he was a wild cat,
the enormous torn he found hiding
in the hay mow with a trap on his foot,
Father, who was good with animals,
coaxed the animal into letting
him release its iron teeth,
fed him with milk he carried
in a bowl up the ladder to his lair.
The resident barn cats
had to be content with
an occasional jet of milk
from the cows, squirted in their direction!
They learned to keep their mouths open
during milking time.
Eventually Oscar Wilde, as Daddy dubbed him
recovered, walked with a limp, hissed
at everyone and bared his wicked mouth.

The other barn cats were named
for radio news announcers:
H.V. Kaltenborn, Lowell Thomas,
Gabriel Heatter, Even when Edward R. Murrow
had kittens he refused to change the name.
"Miracles happen," he told us,
his eyes twinkling, he who didn't believe
in anything transcendent.
Later when we four girls
began to have boyfriends,
he named the cats for them.
Larry Wilson, Robert Jefferson;
Skinny Davenport. He'd call
their names loudly while we nearly died
of shame. And he had to keep renaming them
as the boys changed. Kenneth Romaine Jones,
he'd sing out, and who could think
romantic thoughts about any boy
when every time you saw him,
you heard your father and those
mewling, greedy cats.

Bighorn Sheep

Twenty feet away thirty-four ewes and lambs;
seven yearlings, the males' horns
beginning to turn toward the great coils
they'll wear when adult.
They play at butting each others' heads.
I am close enough to see ewes' wool
is flecked with white among the brown,
like my hair, now flecked with grey.
They nibble, look at me, nibble again
this intensely green Specimen Mountain grass.

I, who have never been this close to them,
keep silent, know how easily they spook,
sink down by the path, open my lunch,
careful not to crackle sandwich wrappers.
We do not speak the same language,
but we are strangely content here,
browsing and watching each other.

Sun on the purple tops of the Never Summer
Range,
a view I am saving to sustain me through
the lowland winter. They — nonchalant
before this spectacle which belongs to them.
After a while the wind blows cold;
I rise carefully and turn back toward the world.
Then they, too, bound away,
their tan, shield-shaped rumps
shining in the last light of the morning.

Bird in Guadalajara

Two reluctant schoolboys loiter
by the fountain's lip, flip water on each other.
A parti-colored parrot flies low, perches
on a gnarled limb. They hurl paper wads
to bring him down, but he looks back from
Quetzalcoatl;
he has seen the real marauders:
Cortez and his conquistadors blazing in their shiny
armor;
then veterans of the Foreign Legion,
festooned with braid and silky yellow sashes
above their crimson pantaloons;
U.S. Cavalry's high crowned ranger hats,
wool uniforms dripping olive drab, and on their
boots,
wheeled spurs for their enormous horses,
hungry for the fodder of Mexico.

Parrot cocks his head, observes their childish
search
for stick or stone, but the sweeper
and his lazy broom has been this way,
and finally, as the bells of Santa Clara
beat their iron tongues against the metal bread
they eat three times a day, the boys pick up
their satchels, scuff their shoes toward school,
toward spelling lessons and arithmetic.
They leave the bird to watch, one eye glittering
like a topaz — the other's glass or flashlight bulb.

His colored plumage may spell old secrets,
but neither bird nor boys can read
the significance — the definitions
lost four hundred years ago
when righteous clergy, dressed like crows,
burned the holy documents, broke the jaguar
statues,
stole the feather cloaks telling sacred myths,
and sent them home to Isabella.

Black Dog

I saw you yesterday sitting beside the driver
of the rusty red pickup, waiting for the green light
at Mt. Harmon Road. You were looking around,
as if you were his buddy, or the navigator,
as if you had never had your teeth
in my heels, dragging my every step
attached as permanently my shadow,
O, black dog of despair.

Blacksnake and Catbird*

And now the blacksnake lives beneath the vine,
and forages for chipmunks, mice, for flesh
and bone, for blood; the catbird searches, finds
the meaty cabbage worm for lunch. Balance
of good and evil? Gain and loss? Cool coil
with ganglion for brain, grey feathered head
without a conscience: you pounce, snatch your
spoils
and eat. No old myths, no guilt, no dread,
no logic. Your appetites' intrusion
on my moral sense bewilders. I pluck
this lettuce leaf; it trembles, contusion,
then limpness. It was living, too. Bad luck
for vegetables that fill my empty plate
since love no longer feeds my appetite.

Note
*This typescript contains extensive comments
from two or more readers, suggesting that it may
have been revised further at some point.

Blind Fish
for MacCannon Brown

The blind fish in her sein
are neither wild nor tame,
not lucid, not insane,

but prescient; they leapt
freely into her net,
to its hand-tied pockets.

Their silvered-over eyes
see through glaze, recognize
the cybele in disguise.

They give themselves for nurture:
fin, scale, white meat's core,
both body's sustenance and metaphor.

Breakfast on the Deck with Sparrows

Nothing happens.
Fits of sparrows flutter to the Feeder.
Chickadee fledglings perch on the rail,
dash in and snatch a seed.
worry it on the apple tree branch.
Beady-eyed squirrel tilts
on the flexible, filigreed locust.
waits his chance to leap.

Clouds take their lime, meandering,
Forming and reforming, deciding
For art or For rain.

Across the park I watch
three stories of the nursing home.
The nurses, smiling, cheerful,
ghost down the corridors of the last breath,
on their padded shoes,
starting the new morning for all of those
to whom this may be the last morning.

Well or ill, live or die, design, disaster, crisis,
World changes, car crashes.
plane drops, politician lies,
but you can depend on sparrows
Every morning
fluttering in the gutter,
sorting the diamonds of sand.

Cat Morning in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Last night slinks home in Persian fog fur
with grey cat from his nightly prowl,
cat smile on his cat face, low growl
in his throat, like first traffic's purr.

Kerf 2020, p. 1.

Cerulean Warbler in Iowa

Your song ascends and descends
in the blue light,
Flute notes say blue winds
out of blue mist over the blue spaces
the Tasseled Larch and the Blue Spruce.

You flutter, flit, unseen,
giving voice to all the blue guitars
in the world.

Brave traveler who winters
in the Amazon jungle's
secret hideouts as if you knew
you are endangered.

I cannot tell you the sad news:
that far away beside the blue doors
of Sidi Bou Said, ancient and lovely,
blue and white tiles on the saint's tomb,
they sledge-hammered broke, set fire
to crack the shards —

But the bearded righteous cannot have
all the blue in the world. Their truncheons
cannot beat the blue of the Mississippi.
They cannot maul you, tiny blue feather,
riding the tree tops. Oh, slice of blue sky,
hidden warbler, secret inside the blue landscape
of the river vales, sing cerulean, sing back
the beauty of blue in this world.

The Company We Keep

Too bare-brained to understand
everyone despises us,
far too many of our kind and
worthless,
"...two sparrows are sold for a
farthing."
Near and far, we're poor,
bathing in dust, drinking from puddles,
eating crumbs from the cruel street's table,
although we are unworthy, unhouseled.
We cannot soar or sing.
Our language, like the squeak of rusty hinges,
cheeps and cheerful chirps even when
distress
should clothe us in silence. No plumage fit for
the capes
of Mayan princes,
we keep our Quaker garb, dun and grey.
No poet celebrates us since Catullus,
Not even one little brown
poem.

We are ubiquitous beggers,
guttersnipes,
the only bird who prefers to hang around
human houses.

Untitled version of "The Company We Keep"

Too bare-brained to understand we're poor
and plain, that everyone despises us,
that there are far too many of our kind,
but we chirp cheerful and oblivious.
We bathe In dust, drink from dirty puddles,
deemed unworthy, neglected, cursed,
eating crumbs from the cruel street's table.
Our garb Quaker while other birds fuss
over royal plumage, sing sweet songs.
The poets never celebrate us,
not even one little brown poem.
Yet, we dare more than the cautious
birds, not afraid to hop upon the sill
of Interstices made to push
the hot air out at celling height
from human's enormous houses.
We fly In, build nests on chandeliers,
and then we're called good luck and noticed!

Day after Perahera

At the Gangaramaya Temple the day after
Perahera,
priests have washed the green velvet caparisons,
gold lamé ones with ruffles, silver with sequins and
nailheads,
hot pink, deep purple, flame red ones, and laid
them out
in the courtyard to dry, along with matching ear
covers,
headpieces with great circles cut for eyes,
and long aprons for the trunks. Little bhikkus,
in their orange robes look up from their lessons,
and dream of drums, dancers masked
like crows, monkeys, and leopards.
They shiver, remembering
fringed white ones gyrating like ghosts --
temple drums, conch shell horns, small cymbals,
brass trumpets, torches, flags,
and one hundred fifty elephants!

from *What You Try to Tame*

Double Agents

A white cat sits on the roof
of the house across the street,
watching me.

I watch the balcony doors
of Iran's new five-story embassy
two streets away where the cleaning
woman mops and technicians take a smoke.
The microwave antenna
with red warning light atop
the stairs doesn't tell me much.

Now a garden lizard lifts his wrinkled neck from
the wall,
a miniature Tyrannosaurus Rex,
and looks at all of us with ancient eyes.
None of us know
how much he knows.

from *What You Try to Tame*

Fathers

The young elk buck charges the patriarch,
Cows murmur, antlers crack, echo the forest.
Son, I watch you carefully, knowing. I saw
my father die. The nurse pulled the sheet
over his face and disclosed the wounds,
and only I recognized the goring.
Now I bleed internally and the injury
is terminal. Life leads to one end. Jesus,
you aimed everything toward the antlered cross.
It killed your mother, and you, knowing
more than the rest of us, found
the only way to kill your father.

February

Eight cardinals this morning at the feeder,
red arrows for February; they pierce the cold air
wing in briskly from secret pines
to start their day's business.
Males chase females away,
inspect sunflower seeds,
pick them over for black pearls.
After they depart, fickle purple finches fly in.
I don't know how to keep them coming back.
Some morning I will wait, making the coffee last
till they come, but they will have flown,
gone elsewhere. The first time I saw one,
his head bright red with spatters of color
down his breast, I gasped, thought he was
a bloody apparition, knew he was
a warning, a sign that nature is both cruel
and kind; my right hand red, my left, white;
my paired lungs, one breathing in health,
the other, destruction; my grey brain,
divided like a walnut, the left pure,
the right corrupt. I put on my coat,
my boots, and refill the feeder;
the light stays longer each day,
climbs higher, and I lift my face
to salute the deadly, beneficent sun.

Filling the Holes

Stiff dorsal fin flag in and out up/down away
dolphin of secret deeps,
pelicans of greed and opportunities
quawkers and
d
i
v
e
r
s
Far out, the regatta of souls
waltzes across the water's skin,
tacks around judges' boats marking the course.
Beach walkers shade their eyes and watch.
The umbrellas of joy open
and always the little children
who don't know any better
dig holes in the sand … and run back … and forth
with sea water in their red and yellow pails
digging and filling, again and again.

Finding a Blue Jay Feather

Is lucky, especially one this blue,
striped black horizontally on one side
of the rib and tipped with white.
The tiny feathers of the feathers called barbs,
grow twigs called barbules, carry
miniature hooklets to hold the web
of feathers together, more complex
than the superstructure of a jet plane,
all this wonder of engineering in my pocket.

It lifted the clamorous jay
above the stubble fields, winter-bleached
and hard as Iron, above the cumbered river,
still as stone, above abandoned barns
where ghosts of horses
breathe their frosty breaths.
It offers you a journey
if you will take the risk,
propelled by this flexible oar
that once rowed the invisible lanes of the air.

Fishing the Wapsi at Troy Mills

Old fisherman on the bank casts his line
into the Wapsi. The fish bite
or they don't bite, he knows the time
may be wrong or right, day too dark, too light.

Northerns refuse his Mepps spinner and spoon,
and smallmouth disdain his crankbaits,
floating rapalas. Nothing at noon,
at four, and nothing bites at all till late.

As the sun goes down, a fighting walleye
takes a nightcrawler on a jig
leaps, twists, dives, doesn't want to die
to this life, struggles, although he's old, big

with years and wiles. Fisherman sees the gleam
in its yellow eye mirrors his own
— both of them swam against the stream.
He slides it back in the water, goes home.

Flying Fish

She first saw them at night
following the ferry,
a streak of phosphorescent moonlight
arcing up from the black waves, splashing back.

The next day while she splashed
in the Caribbean surf, thousands
of fingerlings found her,
swam around her as if she were a log,
or a buoy, until a larger fish,
hungry for dinner, dashed into their midst
and they whirled, turning and leaping,
catapulting out of the water in all directions
over her in half circles, their rainbow stripes
glittering in the sun, and she stood there
like God, watching good and evil
play out the balance.

Flying Higher

Fireflies emerge low across the lawn
now they disperse higher into the treetops,
scattered shards of light,
no coherent mass, no logic to their flights,
no pattern, no reason,
no control.
Only free and lovely.

Footprints

Every footprint is a white exclamation point
going someplace to happen,
shadowed in blue, set in frost —
will last until the pale snow
fills it; perhaps its ridges
will remain, broken moraines
for the field mouse, beside the torn, tan grass
that whips in the righteous wind.

Who walks this way goes quickly, head down,
oblivious to the marks, making her way
against the wind before dark
closes its cold curtain.
Here the silent hawk flies soft as snow,
hungry in this white desert,
and in his burrow, the rabbit shudders.

Fruit flies

My morning begins with murder,
two or three before breakfast.
They reproduce more abundantly than ideas,
arise unbidden, as mysterious
as temptations. They have no fear,
alighting on the rim of my cup; no discrimination —
they prefer rotten pears to fresh;
no shame, they crawl all over each other
in the sunlight, in the moonlight,
in the light from anyone's eye.
I am making a tooled leather belt —
"Ten at one blow," practicing cruelty,
getting ready to wrestle the giant.

Futile

Old sheep dog tries to
herd fireflies like I tried to
shape my little life.

Garden

Goldenrod, wild asters, Queen Anne's Lace —
my best crops. Down by the lake
cat tails grow brown cigars,
sunflower bows his head;
cardinal hangs upside down to pillage it,
a drop of blood on the grey calyx.
Crow walks, drags his green-glint wing.
His name is arrogance.
I think of all the carrion
you have tasted, old gossip,
and all the wasted flesh,
the fur and feathers
left beside road.

The Geese

fat nuns parade the barnyard
toes pointed out they waddle
with supreme dignity toward the mash
ganders see her open the gate spread wings
arrow necks yellow bullet beaks
rush toward her hissing like hell fires
know she's afraid running reaches
the barn slams the door against them
shaking in the dark that smells of hay
and horses golden motes float shafts
of sunlight like streaks of honey
sweet as sanctuary

Struthers' Note
To be published in *South and West*

Giving My Hands to the Weimaraners

How can I walk* like a queen toward my garden
when three enormous dogs bound across the
lawn,
teeth hanging out of their black and pink mouths?
It's fear I'm trying to master.

I give my hands to their nips, not snatching them
away, because then they leap higher, think
I have something to eat or throw. Their teeth
don't break my skin, but my hands hurt, invisible
bruises deeper than the bone. They push against
me,
circle me, demand something I don't have.

I pretend I'm not afraid, grab collars, pat flanks
briskly, scratch ears, move with authority,
assume the integrity of my thumbs
wrists, elbows, which they could rip off at will.
They keep their teeth inside their leather lips.
Maybe they like me better now. Or less.

Maybe they just wait for their chance. They test
me every time, but with less expectation
to win. Some hot August day they'll forget
to stir, content in the dust holes they dug
in the flower beds. They'll twitch away flies,
let me go undisturbed toward carrots,
green beans, hot peppers. Will they have given
up their drive to domination? Or is
this somnolence a subterfuge? Do they
lie there dreaming bloody dreams of cracked
bones,
my fingers finally tasted?

Note
walk: The typescript reads "talk."

Ghosting Through Sri Lanka

100 years ago, 30,000 wild elephants owned this island, now only 3,000

On slender ropes ========== toddy gatherers monkey-walk
from palm tree top to top, harvesting pale nectar
from palm buds for brewing illegal kasippu.
Jungle's canopy is their geography. They know wind's paths ~{~{~{~
sway to its dances}~}~}~}.
They watch the ghosts of elephants waft across jungle clearings
where tall grass speaks to stones. Old tuskers,
wispy as fogs, remember ancient Elephant Walks.

They slip between elegant green tea b/u/s/h/e/s,
float like pale chaff above rice paddies.
slide \\ through temple courtyards beside gold Buddhas
holding royal umbrellas ^^^^^^^^^^
crouch beside tuk-tuk drivers in Colombo,

sometimes take tea at Galle Face ***** Hotel while watching sunsets.
They drift across the sunset, sneak into movies,
SIFT across the silver screen, haunt book stores,
hide between lines of poems.

from *What You Try to Tame*

The Ghosts of Hannibal's Elephants

rise up like mist after centuries in the Alpine ice,
come crashing down the mountains,
trumpet wildly, capture the Colosseum,
ride up the steps overlooking the Forum
and speak from Julius Caesar's balcony.

They are the extinct Atlas Mountain elephants,
phantoms in the morning fog, but their shrieks
still make the tents of the Berbers shudder
and peasants in Tuscany shake.
I ride home on their great backs
across the grey Atlantic. Their motion
is the rolling of great ships.
They will conquer New York,
their gold tassels streaming up Fifth Avenue.
Where the gratuitous dead gather,
the dodo bird, the passenger pigeon,
the humpback wisent, the shaggy aurocks,
the ten-foot tall aepyornis of Madagascar;
the right whales of the Pacific —
their blood is melting the ice.
The polar caps will collapse,
come bobbing into the harbors
and swimming with them, the ghosts
of the Gulag, the disappeared of Argentina,
and six million Jews.

Grey Ghosts

Yesterday a wolf-dog escaped from his kennel,
attacked school children at recess.
Four bitten, one scarred for life.
Policeman shot the creature dead.
Custodian scooped away the bloody snow.
I remember the wolves, Francois Villon,
at the outskirts of Paris,
and I am wary, worried.

Here winter is white hell with three grey shadows,
nervous at the door. Only Weimaraners,
but Sheba, Boomer, Baby, whip about like snakes,
perform their danse macabre.
At five A.M., hearing the paper boy's light step,
they pierce the darkness with sharp barks,
rip away what's left of sleep.

They sniff, snuffle, settle down.
I lie awake until at six I hear
the bells of St. Paul's church.
Their Protestant tongues ring Work, Work, Work,
the wholesome sound of making things
like the blacksmith hammer's clang.

At seven I find the three of them
curled into a ball, asleep
like innocents in Eden.
Boomer opens one eye. I turn them out
into the yard, but they soon return
like effects from gloomy causes
or sins coming home, their tongues hanging out
for breakfast.

Husk

It always comes back to the body.
We can pretend to live in the mind,
but that's a cold castle,
like the temple at Tulum,
overlooking the blue Caribbean,
watching the tops of the waves curl like cats
In the fields below the ear of maize
in its green sheath was blessed
by drops of blood in the furrow,
by the beneficence of the gods who accepted
a virgin in their well every spring.
Always it's the wrapper of flesh.

Ice Bison

Monday:
Black waterfall.
Icefalls on both sides;
at the base, enormous heads
of two ice bison locked in combat,
white spray attempting to separate them.

Tuesday:
Two additional ice bison
below old giants,
their heads still growing.

Wednesday:
Melting: Younger buffalo
have become dolphins.
Above old ones,
ice fans, ice chandeliers.

Thursday:
Yesterday's sun hollowed buffalo skulls,
two lower ones changed again,
one a floating crane, its neck extended;
the other a gull.

If that which is of no importance
can be transformed overnight,
so you, who were ice cold
when I last touched your hand
folded across your chest,
are now something different
although I am struggling to believe it.

An Illustration in the Luttrell Psalter

shows a wattlework sheep fold, nineteen sheep;
old ram watches; young ram — horns just
beginning
to curl, all safe within the woven enclosure.
Pattern repeated — white oval bodies, slim oval
ears,
slanted oval eyes gaze toward the east,
except one who looks at us.
The wife milks a ewe; the farmer
pulls burrs from round ringlets of wool — all this
goes on steadily since the fourteenth century,
the lamb still there.

Jaws at the University

It's hard to write the poem of hate,
So I'll just write the poem disgust,
Of had enough, more than enough,
Deliberate deceptions, late,

Notices — the white shark smile,
Arrogant department chair,
She'd eat me in a moment, hair
Nails, publications, large and small.

I must be edgy porcupine,
On guard with all my bristles out,
Revenge her in poem about
The predators of academe.

Leaping to Conclusions

Two long-tailed gray monkeys
on long chains beside the gate
at Unawatuna's beachfront restaurant
caper about, screech,
scratch, urinate, defecate,
fornicate.

We tell the owner
he should return them to the jungle,
let wild creatures be free.

"I've tried," he sighs - "driven them out
in the jungle, turned them loose,
but they always find their way back.
They like the handouts here.
If I didn't keep them chained
they'd leap on the tables and chairs,
jump on your laps, steal your plates,
ransack the kitchen. Be careful,"
he says, "what you try to tame,
I look at you,
you look at me,
and we both
laugh.

from *What You Try to Tame*

Marauders

Indie, the caramel-colored tabby, hunts voles
at the garden's edge, brings them home like
trophies.

Ground squirrels snack on my Casa Blanca lily
bulbs.
May they die slowly, writhing with indigestion.

Cousin Ellen brings me tiger lilies
that proliferate like rabbits — tiger-rabbits.

While watering the lily bed, suddenly
it erupts with baby rabbits scattering in all
directions.

Deer who come to snack on my lily buds,
you do not fool me with your grace and beauty.

You are murderers, unrepentant, committing
lilycide.
I will spray with red pepper, scatter blood meal
and lynx urine.

Dandelions and Creeping Charlie are abundant.
Eat that you vandals, you Visigoths, you
desecraters of lilies!

Marianne, Fly Over Sri Lanka
(With a Nod to Elizabeth Bishop)

Marianne, you'd love the mugger crocodile,
blowing bubbles, thrashing his tail,
trying to attract lady crocs,
the sleek water monitor, shiny gray
and dappled yellow on its back
who stands on his tail in the tanks
to wrestle and fight duels.

You and your bat-wing cloak should see
the giant fruit bats who hang
in Victoria Park's trees folded like origami,
unfold at dusk and swoop over my balcony.
One hundred fifty elephants at Perahera time
walk for two weeks from far away towns,
stopping at temples at night to rest.
In Colombo, they're led to the pond
where mahouts scrub their rough gray hides
with green coconut rinds.
You could see the beauty in all of these,
and maybe you could love even the hooded cobra.

from *What You Try to Tame*

Moose

Cow moose headed toward us on the trail
to Crystal Falls ambles along,
her little beard swinging with her gait.
She inspects aspen boughs here and there,
pulls off and munches the best ones

The hike master puts his fingers to his lips.
We stand to the side, but she keeps coming,
and finally, when we don't move,
she steps off the path, crushes
scrubby undergrowth, stops to sample
willow shoots, she never really looks
at us who are devouring her
with our eyes. She could toss
or crush us, enormous in her strength
and bulk. Enormous in her generosity,
too, she decides not to bother
with our puny kind.

Waterfalls of sunlight shower
through the leafy canopy,
illumine her outline.
She moves like a swimmer in a familiar pond,
like a saint radiating a full body halo.

Mud Puppies

The spring sun comes out of its pale shell,
warm yolk, spills over, breaks.
The mud puppies hatch,
come creeping the lawn,
slime clings to them,
green-black, yellow warts.
They dance on their bow legs, their eyes glint,
The child chases them, laughing.
The ancient reptilian tail slips
through his fingers.
The scar on his neck, where the fetal gills
closed ragged, throbs.

My Sheep
(at Hill Top Farm near Esthwaite Water)

I put on my wool stockings, my copper tipped
clogs,
my shawl, take my brolly, go out to count the
sheep
on the hills. Their wool heavy, grey,
their ears slender as folded laurel leaves,
their faces of content turned down to the pleasant
grass,
they browse in the rain; I see them through the
green mist
as Beatrix Potter saw her long-haired Cotswolds,
patrician-faced Leicesters, sturdy Herdwicks.
I check the salt licks, strew clean straw bedding
in the sheepfold, pull their caught wool
from the hedges and rocks, stuff it in my pockets
and spin it at night, sitting by the fireplace
writing stories for the child I never had,
conjuring her with Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail,
and Peter.

Naming the Parts

Adam was too busy
naming the elephants, otters, ostriches.
God had a long list,
and he was a hard task master.
Didn't believe in the eight-hour day
and Adam's brain, still developing —
it strained him
just to keep up with
the kestrels, cormorants, kiwi birds.
In fact, he got so far behind
that God had to make Eve, the helpmate,
and when Adam saw her first,
that hollow feeling in the chest
he attributed to loss of rib.
It was the first time he was aware of parts —
and then her rosy little finger nails
and the petal curve of her ear.
He had named the lilies, so he knew
her breast's perfection,
and oh, that curl of hair
between her legs; beneath it,
roses, rubies, revelation.

Old Tiger

It doesn't make any difference
when you work with a tiger.
They all want to eat you.
Mel Gibson

Tigers at every corner, but they're all paper
except this one: the tawney tiger who waits,
his patience older than he is,
mouth toothless, appetite voracious.
Finally, someday when your back is turned,
as you set your foot on the spade to turn the
garden,
or while your Chevy idles at the stop sign,
when you lift your racket to return the serve,
as you read the letter announcing the baby,
or maybe some night when you awake
and lie there listening to the swish of traffic
in the rain, or some summer evening
when blue heron glides in noiselessly
to fish beside the bank,
old tiger yawns and takes you.

You'll go down calling for the woodcutter
or whispering his name.
Try to believe in his coming,
in his sacred axe, in the blood.

One Bright Thing

Here I found a feather so scarlet
and plumy, no red bird would wear it.
Ray Young Bear says finding a feather
from blue jay, auspicious,
but today, gray and pearly, I know,
though this feather's a fake,
it still makes me lucky.

Pen Holder

French called him pin-pig, first malign
from Pliny who declared his spines
explosive"...so when he stretcheth
his skin, he sendeth and shooteth
his quills." Pliny was wrong, of course.
Mild, even shy, the very worst
he does is when young dogs nose his
rolled up body, — a small rustle
warns them, but they don't listen, fill
their nostrils with sharp, barbed quills.
The old dogs know and won't touch him —
young ones, like soldiers of fortune,
risk to prove their worth. Porcupine
illiterate, defined by spines
has never written, yet ink pens
wrote sagas, epics, and poems,
love lost, war lost, soldiers come home,
utilizing his sharpened pins
for a thousand years. His sin,
only that he is small and meek,
treading slowly, and without speech
to spell his innocence. He says
passive resistance; live and let live.

Power

Thunder rumbles in sky's throat.
Lightning cracks, pops, snaps
its white light, a magnesium flare,
the old dog, terrified. When I open
the door, he bolts past me
into the house, follows me
into my office, turns around three times,
lies down beside my chair. Storm bowls, volleys,
clatters like an iron-wheeled wagon
across the cobbled bridge of the world,
but beside me, he has fallen asleep.
And I remember how the baby quiets when
I enter the dark room, rub his little back.
He sighs, stretches, smiles in his sleep.
I did not ask for this terrible power.
How can I carry on as if I know the answers,
as if I am strong, wise, omnipotent?
Let me be the one outside, the one whimpering
in the dark, the one calling your name.

Rabbits

Small blossoms, messengers from paradise —
cut off. Gone. Rabbits munch my flowers, beans,
and Brussel sprouts, snack on lettuce, apprise
their friends of broccoli and mustard greens.
They invite their cousins, uncles, old aunts
in-laws, shirt tail relations, friends to feast
on my produce. They're rude, brazen. I can't
frighten them away. They freeze, then their least,
light quiver deters me. I know their gall,
but their noses wrinkle innocent. Teeth
like knives cut pea stems neat, diagonal
when I'm not looking. They should come to grief!

These thieves change a gardener, turn me older.
Youth loves Peter Rabbit; age, McGregor!

Note
The Garden Quarto, Coe College (Fall 2019)

Reading the Menu

Sometimes I wonder if the coconuts ever fall
On passersby.
    Yes, unless you hire
the tree climber with his rope
to shinny up and cut down a bunch of them.
Centuries ago when only the Veddahs
lived on the hills, before the Indians moved south,
imagine a leopard padding along,
minding his own catty business, and a jungle
    coconut
falls and grazes his head. Oh, mad cat screams!

The leopard on Yala's rocks
rests his regal head on his royal paw,
surveys the valley below, his yellow eyes
flick over me -- not interesting enough.
(I think he is an editor.)

I telegraph back, "I don't want to go to dinner
with you, either!"

from *What You Try to Tame*

Recognizable Types
Sri Lanka

Star tortoise ambles on his wrinkled, bow legs,
prefers shade in hot afternoons, eats grasses,
fruit and flowers. Courtship difficult.
Several hours of clashing against
the female's shell. He sees well,
but cannot hear winds play the palm's castanets,
waves drumming in from the sea,
the scream of the jackal.

Wild boar disdains music, despises jackals,
Doesn't care that he isn't handsome
or graceful. Rolls, luxuriating in his muddy wallow,
snorts, squeals, grunts, bares his curved yellow
tusks,
has no difficulty copulating and does as he damn
well pleases.

5/20/2017

Sailing with the Dolphins

One starboard, one larboard
barnacle tattoo on sleek physique,
dip, dive, slide along companionably,
easy, full of grace.
Yellow and orange sails set
for steady wind, we move laterally
along the coast; you snack on mackerel
along the way, flip your tail fins
when you swim off to follow fish.
I follow wind that feeds sails,
did not ask for your friendship,
a gift given, undeserved,
like so many I never earned,
emptied into my lap
because I was there and lucky.

Snake Among Stones

Tonight I am like the snake,
whose motion, all of a piece,
goes contrary ways. And what am I to believe,
to do, while the body dies, yet other cells appear
or old ones refresh themselves?
Truly, I am not myself, dying daily,
made new each night.

Lillian, eighty-six, her mind damaged,
yet she fights death. I saw his minions
in last night's dream. Hers in black,
with white slashes on his suit, Death
so stylish! The other ghost,
more vague, white and gray,
following the bold one,
shaking rattles and castanets,
a *danse macabre* on the graveyard's walls.
The pale one comes for the football player
with AIDS, just twenty-eight,
high school quarterback
whom everyone cheered ten years ago.
"Ring around the rosy; we all fall down."

Invisible logic operates, but "discouragements,
premonitions, questings are essential parts
of answers." O, answers, hiding in the cemetery
grass,
transformation must be more than this
slow journey. The old poet tells us
that death is more radiant than life,
still, the known, with all its ills
and evils, is more comfortable than the unknown.
Abraham died and Moses, Sarah and Esther,
Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus.
Some have been elevated toward heaven
on gilt-edged clouds, but I doubt it.
Every time I get on an airplane, it seems
impossible, despite all my science and experience,
that this enormous contrivance of metal and
plastic
can vault the air, defy gravity, whisk
this pod of strangers from Frankfurt
to Damascus.

I am moving forward, like my world-be-mentor,
the snake, by moving backwards, toward death
that may be life turned inside out, flying soon
toward the ancient world where wisdom may
lurk in the stones, or the stones may close
their thick lips and say nothing.

Squid at the Chicago Aquarium

Sit there in the water,
stare at me with that unblinking eye.
I stare back and tell you
it's a matter of education, of scientific
knowledge for the inlanders,
that you should pulse
there in your watery cage.

But your eye knows.
We cage to prove our two-handed
superiority.
So we diminish
momentarily that cage which we all
carry around on our backs,
like a snail's cage,
or like the auger-shell mollusk
whose cage grows so heavy
that the creature, dragging it in the sand,
dies of exhaustion.

Three Crows

The garden's piebald with soggy leaf mulch
and patches of melting snow. The criminal crow
in the bare oak is lookout.
His brothers flutter down, dark as bad news.
Mother rabbit advances toward them, head down
like a fighting bull, dances menacingly
first at one, then at the other.
They lurch at her alternately,
blue-black wings outspread.
Watcher swoops in to help;
today they give up after a few feints.
They know they can come back. Later I see
them scratching around the leaves for her nest.
When I dare to go out, I'll find bits
of fur, a little blood upon
the broken stalks. Last summer they
spotted robin's new eggs, kept coming
back, persistent as sin, until they found
their chance.

Robin abandoned her round mud nest,
Rabbit still sniffs around,
confused, as if there is something
she has forgotten. I have not forgotten,
though you were so small there was no shell,
no bone, yet I know you existed,
the little essence of you
somewhere in the bloody discharge.
The three crows sit on the fence,
and though it has been ten years,
I think about you, wish you were here
laughing and playing in the yard.

Transfer of Attachment

Young sandhill cranes, fed first by hands
disguised as crane puppets
and later by humans in crane suits,
can transfer their affection to real cranes,
learn to survive in the wild,
migrate in fall, and in spring
return to their nesting ground.
With humans it is more difficult.
I love your gloves, your hat,
your suit, and although Hart Schaffner and Marx
make thousands of navy blue serges,
only yours draws me. All the others
are worn by manikins walking like robots
holding their briefcases stiffly.
Other hands light my cigarette,
but I know they are sticks
covered with plastic,
and when their mouths speak
their squawks are recordings.

I will sew me a costume,
decorate it with feathers,
flap my black-tipped wings,
dance stiff-legged, and cry like the crane,
like the deceived fledging crane.

Trap

Tenuous as a girl at her first dance,
squirrel enters Have-a-Heart trap
baited with sunflower seeds. Keeps turning
right, left, behind — flashbulb eyes
bright with caution.
Delicate black paws snap off
morning-coat striped hull.
One moment of appetite, and TRIP
sheet metal doors clang shut.

You drive it across town
to the woods, open the doors.
Terrified, it scurries up a tree,
curses you in squirrel talk.
Still alive, it ought to be grateful.

I ought to be grateful, pleased
with the sturdy construction of your other trap,
happy that you do have-a-heart,
although mine has been transported
across cities, through forests, released
to cruel oaks where hunter stalks, red fox sulks,
great horned owl comes out at night,
its curved claws ready.

Waking at Night

Last night the owls called — sometimes three
notes,
sometimes six. Oboe and bassoon. At 3:40
they sang in the tree tops.

This morning waiting for the tea kettle to boil,
I read "improbable / as angels and as invisible...."*
Looking through leaded glass panes
at pine's grey legs, I think I see the transparent air
move slightly, shiver with snow coming on,
or disturbed momentarily by passage of the
unseen.
Were they in the woods last night with the owls,
cold out there, bereft of flesh or feathers?

There is so little I can do for the beloved dead,
my own or others,
still, I will hang the silk ski underwear
on a branch where they can find it —
to wrap themselves in tonight,
and I will dream of them, flitting through the woods
beside* the owls, light as bird's notes,
warmed, knowing that although imperceptible now,
someone remembers.

Notes

Debra Gregor ,"The Afterlife" in *The New Yorker*.
March 12, 1990.
beside: The typescript reads "besides."

White Pelicans

They swim in flotillas,
dignified as the British Armada;
they own the lake,
migrate through in April,
their feathers pearlescent, beaks bright coral,
feet enormous as sycamore leaves.
In October they return bedraggled, faded,
like they've been on a summer-long drunk.
They beat their black-edged wings in a water
circle,
paddle wildly, draw their knot tight,
dive together on signal; spear fish with sharp
beaks;
toss them high. With elegant timing,
catch them like jugglers. Now they take off
in spirals, the cool autumn air
lifting their ragged, royal feathers.
I think they are like J.R. and SueEllen,
glamorous in the springtime,
but hollow at the bone.

Winter Racing at Saratoga Springs

In August thoroughbreds race at Saratoga
Springs:
exuberant workouts, conscientious rub-downs,
pampered stalls, solicitous vets.

In January, dark barns, blacksmith shop boarded
up,
clubhouse shuttered. No echoes of past hurrahs
float over the padlocked paddocks.
Tonight's moon pulls back cloud swags,
Venus on left, Pleiades like ice chips above her.

White tail deer line up
where the starting gate stood.
I, their only crowd, who dare not cheer
their sprint around the track —
a smudge of Impressionist colors,
delicate as ghosts, swift as birds,
silent as the flight of owls
from Great Bear Swamp.

Midnight, the Remarkable Cat

[Struthers left this memoir for her children and grandchildren. It appeared in multiple drafts in her digital files. I have merged and organized those materials into what I hope is close to her final intention.]

Midnight comes to 503 Forest Drive

When Midnight was a kitten, he came home in Dad's briefcase. He had a big red ribbon around his neck. He did not like it.

"What shall we call him?" Dad asked.
"Midnight," John said.
"Midnight," Georgia said.
"Black cats are often called midnight," Mom said, "when they're as black as midnight. But this little cat is a silver tabby. His fur is grey, white, and black stripes. He's not black."
"Midnight," Georgia said.
"Midnight," John said.
And the baby said, "Mmmmmm!"
"What difference does it make?" Dad said.
And Mom said, "Okay."

Midnight explores

Midnight sniffed all the people. They were all right. Then he explored every room and sniffed it. They were all right. He explored the basement. It was all right. He decided that this was a good home. He was tired, so he lay down in front of the warm air register in the kitchen. It was all right, and he fell asleep.

Midnight Grows Up

When Midnight was older, Mom let him outside to play. Soon he was exploring and sniffing the neighborhood. He was a very careful cat. When he wanted to cross the street, he looked both ways, and if a car was coming, even if it was far away, he waited. John and Georgia watched how careful he was. They were careful, too, and they waited even when a car was far away.

Midnight and the Fat Baby

One day when Midnight was sleeping in his favorite place in the kitchen, the baby, who was just learning to walk, toddled into the kitchen. She lost her balance and fell on poor Midnight. Midnight liked the baby, but she was sitting on him. He could not get up, and she could not get up.He did not like that, so he cried for help. He began to cry loudly. Mom came running, and pulled up the baby and then the cat. He forgave the baby for falling and pinning him down. After all she was just a baby.

Midnight and the Hanging Toys

One day Dad brought home a tree and put it in a stand in the living room. Midnight was a proper cat. He had good cat manners. He did not scratch the furniture. He did not scratch the curtains. He never leapt onto the couch. He never climbed onto the table or the kitchen counters. When he was outside, he never climbed trees. He would not climb this tree in the house.

Mom put a lot of shiny things on the tree. Some of the shiny things hung down from the lowest branches. Midnight usually lay down in front of the warm air register. But there was room for a cat under the lowest branches of the tree. Once Midnight was under the tree, he found he could lift a paw and bat the dangling shiny things. Then they would swing back and forth. What a good toy!

After a while, when he pawed one of the shiny things, it fell down and broke. Midnight went back to his place beside the warm air register. The next day he again played with the shiny toys, but two of them fell down and broke into many pieces.

When Mom came home from work, she looked at the broken pieces. She looked at Midnight. She guessed what had happened. She moved all the shiny toys to higher branches. Midnight was a good cat and a proper cat. He looked at the shiny things and passed them by. He went back to his place in front of the warm air register.

Midnight and the Mouse

One day Mom found a mouse in one of the lower cabinets in the kitchen. She did not want the mouse in her kitchen. She picked up Midnight who was in the middle of a good nap in front of the warm air register. "Cats are supposed to catch mice," she said.

She put Midnight in the cupboard with the mouse and shut the door. There was no sound from the cupboard. After a long time, she opened the cupboard door. Midnight stalked out with his tail in the air. He didn't look at Mom. He was mad at Mom. He was not one of those low-life cats that caught mice! Mom looked in the cupboard. Back in the corner was the mouse, shaking with fear, but it was all right.

Midnight at the Vet

Midnight hated to ride in the car. Every time Mom put him in the car, she took him to the vet's office. Midnight hated the vet's office. He hated its smell. He knew that when he went in the car to

the vet's office, he would get a shot. He didn't like shots, even though John, Georgia, the big baby, and the new little baby told him to be brave. The big baby whispered to him that she didn't like shots either.

Midnight had grown into a large cat. He weighed thirteen pounds. It was hard for Mom to hold him, especially when there were other animals in the waiting room. He wiggled and squirmed, but he never bit or scratched Mom, or any of the family, not even the time the fat baby fell on him.

Midnight's mood turned bad when there were dogs in the waiting room. He knew dogs had no proper manners.

One day there was a portly lady in the waiting room holding a tiny poodle. Midnight did not like the little poodle. The little poodle barked at Midnight. "My dog doesn't like cats," the lady said. "He wants to fight cats."

Mom looked at the fuzzy little dog and said, "My cat eats dogs that size." The vet's nurse hurried over to Mom and Midnight. "I have an examining room open for you," and she rushed them into it.

Midnight Guards the Front Lawn

Midnight protected the family from dogs. Most of the dogs that went past 503 Forest Drive were on leashes, and their owners made them be polite. But once in a while a dog came who had neither leash nor manners. These dogs would walk all over Midnight's lawn. Most of them. Midnight arched his back and hissed at them, and they wisely went away.

But one day, the dog didn't go away. This dog had no sense of what was proper, although Midnight kept telling him. He hissed and hissed again to give him fair warning. At last came the time to act.

Midnight leaped upon the dog's back and dug in his claws. The dog began to jump around. Midnight hung on like a cowboy on a bucking horse. Now the dog understood Midnight's rules. He ran for the sidewalk to get away. Midnight hung on until the dog was out of Midnight's yard.

That dog never came back.

Midnight and the Angel Food Cake

Sometimes Mom and Dad had company for potluck dinners. One evening when people came, one lady brought a salad, one brought vegetables, and another brought dessert, an angel food cake frosted with whipped cream. She left the cake on the kitchen table to wait until time for dessert.

Mom was serving turkey. And while it was roasting, Midnight lay in front of the oven, because turkey was his favorite meal. Mom always gave him the scraps. The children, who ate early, would save pieces for him, too.

Midnight enjoyed all the good smells. Salad smells did not interest him. Neither did vegetables. But the odor of turkey filled the kitchen, even after Mom had put it on the dining room table.

While the adults were eating dinner, Midnight savored the odor of whipped cream on the cake. He was a proper cat who never jumped on the table. But that cream smelled so good.

Midnight looked around the empty kitchen. The good smell of whipped cream was so wonderful that Midnight did something he had never done before. He jumped on the table. And then he put out his pink tongue and took a good lick.

Just then Georgia came in. She hurried to the swinging door between the kitchen and dining room, "Mom, you won't believe what that…."

Mom instantly guessed what was happening. With her left hand she pushed Georgia back into the kitchen before she could say another word. Then, with her right hand she reached out and snatched Midnight off the table and dropped him on the floor.

Midnight landed lightly on all four feet. Cats can do that.

Then Georgia and Mom inspected the cake. There was only one little place where Midnight's tongue had licked it. Mom took a kitchen knife and made another swirl in the whipped cream. It looked as good as new.

Later the guests ate all the cake, and no one left a scrap of it for Midnight.

Midnight's Escape

Midnight was a healthy cat, but one day, the bigger baby who was now called Charity, and the little baby, now called Mary, noticed that Midnight had a bump on his side. They told Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad looked at the bump and said that Midnight had to go to the vet.

This time Midnight did not go home after a shot. The vet put him to sleep. When Midnight woke up, he was in one of the vet's rooms with the bad smells.

Finally, Dad came to take him home. The vet said, "You must keep him inside for two weeks until his incision heals."

Midnight's incision was the place where the vet had cut his side open and took out the bad bump. Then the vet had taken a big needle and thread and sewed Midnight's side together again.

Midnight didn't understand why he had to stay inside and be careful. He began to feel good. He wanted to go outside again and make his morning rounds of the neighborhood as he usually did. He watched for a chance to sneak out.

One morning, while the children sat at the kitchen table, Mom was cooking their breakfast in her pajamas and robe. When Dad opened the back door to go to work, Midnight ran out.

The children were upset. “Midnight can’t go out yet. His incision isn’t healed. We have to go after him and bring him back.” They started out the door. Mom picked up a big cardboard box and came with them. The children were crying. “He’ll hurt himself.”

Midnight scampered down the street, climbed over a neighbor’s fence and sniffed along the foundation of a house. Mom and the children tried to keep up, but they had to open the gate.

Midnight crept under the bushes of Miss Kriz, who had the beautiful flower garden, and then moved on.

He paused at the back door of an old woman they did not know. She said, “He likes a little liver sometimes.” She had a little plate for him. Mom reached to catch him, but he got away and went on to the next house.

Midnight walked fast and crawled under Mrs. Hanson’s hedge. The children crawled after him. Mom went around the hedge.

At the next house, he stopped to look in the window, and another cat looked out at him. Midnight meowed, and the window cat meowed back.

Then Midnight sneaked behind a lawnmower on a driveway. When they found him, he had just finished lapping up a little saucer of milk left out for him.

Walking fast, he went up to the green door of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. Mr. Wilson came out with a small dish. “He likes a little piece of liver,” he said, and he put the dish down for Midnight. Midnight ate it in one bite and hurried on.

“Now we know why he likes his morning walk,” the children said.

He crept along the foundation of Miss Novak’s garage. The children crept along, too. Midnight found Miss Novak’s patch of catnip. He rolled in it. “Now we can catch him,” the children said, and they did.

Midnight yowled. He did not want to be caught. Mom put him in the cardboard box and shut its flaps, and he did not like this. He meowed and meowed.

They began walking back home, Mom carrying the cardboard box. They were almost at their door when suddenly Midnight gave a great "Yowl!" and exploded from the box. They all were surprised.

Mom put down the empty box. “I think he’s telling us that his incision is healed,” she said.

At day's end Midnight came home and lay down in front of the hot air register, although it was summer and no hot air came out. He was tired.

Midnight’s Injuries

Midnight often went out in the dark. He wouldn’t tell the children where he went. He wouldn’t tell any of the family where he went. It was his secret. One morning he came home with the tip of his tail gone. The children thought that he had been accidently caught in a trap set for a raccoon. They were sorry that some people set traps.

Midnight says Farewell to 503 Forest Drive

The children grew older. They all left the home for adventures of their own. Midnight was lonesome. Dad and Mom were lonesome. They grew older. Even Midnight grew older. He did not go out in the dark anymore.

One day when he was seventeen, which is very old for a cat, Midnight went away. He never came back.

The vet said that cats often go away when they are ready to die. Mom and Dad were sad. They wrote letters to all the children, and they were sad, too.

One bright spring day Dad looked up at the sky. “Look! There is a big cloud shaped like a cat. Does it remind you of Midnight?”

Mom looked up at the cloud. “It has grey and white and black stripes, just like Midnight. It looks like he’s up in the clouds.”

“He was the most remarkable cat ever,” Dad said.

Mom said, “Yes, he was the most remarkable cat ever.”

They both sniffled, and that was all right.

Acknowledgments

This list is compiled from those Struthers made for several of her proposed collections. It is possible that some poems in this collection were published in magazines and journals, but are not listed here. She did not provide details of publication date, issue and page numbers with her acknowledgments.

"An Illustration in the Luttrell Psalter" *Choice*
"Au bade at Lake Okoboji at Teddy Shuttleworth's Cabin" *The San Pedro* River *Review*
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"Immunity," *Caesura* and *The Tiger's Eye*
"Iraq Jerboa" *Poet & Critic*
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"Not Knowing Why" *Coe Review,* reprinted in Ted Kooser's column, "American Lives in Poetry"
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"Parallelism" *The North American Review*
"Pissed Off" *Snowy Egret*
"Prester John" *Poet & Critic*
"Rare Romp" *Caesura* and *Snowy Egret*
"Red Ants, the Army" *The Tiger's Eye*
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"Riding the Water Buffalo" *Zymbol (*Dublin, Ireland*)*
"Self-Contained" *The North American Review*
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"Spider" *Dash*
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"The Great Apes Visit Yala" *Caesura* and *Southern Humanities Review*
"The Kindness of Crocodiles" *Caesura*
"The Lean Cats of Izmir" *Poet & Critic*
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"Walking on Bears" *Midwest Quarterly*
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